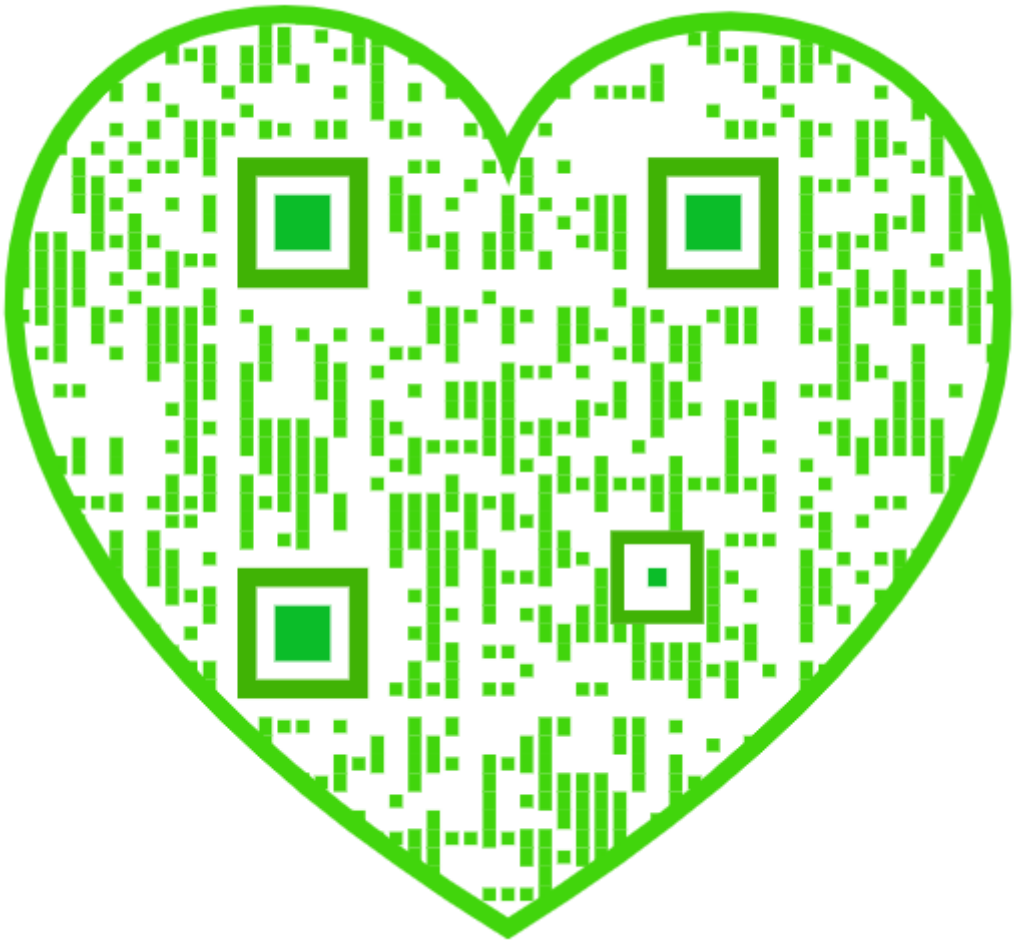

THE MONKS OF MOUNT ATHOS

Jacques Valentin

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PART ONE

1. *The Journey Begins*

THE PROVINCE OF THESSALY, bathed in the dazzling light peculiar to Greece, was spread beneath the aeroplane taking us from Athens to Salonika. The earth was the same golden ochre colour in all directions, the land seemed scarcely inhabited. A few roads linked the little ports with white houses. The coast-line was indented against a deep blue sea, as though by fjords. The heat haze which always veils the Greek horizon hid all but the distant summits of the mountains in the interior.

Soon the peak of Olympus appeared. Seen from above, this bare yellow mountain where generations of men chose to imagine their gods appeared in its true light: the symbol of a dead religion, a symbol which men had once needed but which today had no more meaning. The mythology which had nourished a whole civilization had vanished, swept away by time like the civilization itself.

The peasant beside me, in his black suit and striped shirt, was quite unmoved by the spectacle. He told me he was bringing home his daughter, a girl of twelve, from the hospital in Athens where she had been for an operation. He had other things to think about than the gods. The rest of the passengers, who looked rather better-off, were dozing or sipping coffee.

We three were gazing out, without talking, each at his own port-hole. We had taken the road to Greece for the sake of another celebrated place: Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain of the Orthodox faith.

Like Olympus, it has a famous name. It is the symbol of the faith to the whole Orthodox world, and its singularity is that it has remained to this day a refuge for men who wish to consecrate their lives to prayer and find peace far from the world.

We were drawn to Mount Athos, that peninsula forbidden to women and full of monks, because of its extraordinary history, its famous frescoes, its rich monasteries and its hermits. We were not travelling as Byzantinists or iconographers; our object was not to find rare manuscripts, nor to go from church to church analysing the different schools of painting. We had set out simply as three young men full of curiosity, wishing to get to know a way of life and thinking different from our own. What we hoped to discover was the spirit which moved men to isolate themselves on this peninsula, perhaps the only place in Europe to have escaped devastation throughout the centuries. What was the nature of this theocracy, this republic of monks who had forbidden the presence of any female creature? Would the men living here prove to have preserved the secret of spiritual life, or would decadence have made them forget the original purpose of the great buildings which had brought fame to the Holy Mountain? Would Athos, like Olympus, be empty of meaning?

We intended to make a film of what we saw. The three of us had decided to make this expedition together because the things we specialized in complemented each other. Georges Schaetzel, who was in publicity, was the team's administrator. He and I had already proved, on other journeys, that both our physical capacities and our points of view were well matched, making close collaboration easy. Lively, inquisitive, always looking for the unexpected, Georges was my ideal interrogator during the discussions which precede the making of a film. He was also going to be my assistant in photography. Being a practical man, he had to look after our accounts, control our expenses and decide each day what we would eat or whether we would eat.

Gilbert Denise was quite different. An architect, he was a man of the future, a builder. Cool-headed and positive, he brought a third element to our collaboration. He had come in order to get to know Greece, and looked at it with an eye all the

more lucid in that he was predisposed towards modern architecture. His job was to make surveys of some of the monasteries and of Byzantine chapels, and to study the frescoes and determine to what degree they were related to or differed from those inspired by western religion.

As for me—an architect too—my mission was to make a pictorial record of our journey in photographs and film. I was also more or less responsible for the whole adventure, to which all three of us were thoroughly committed.

The nearer we came to our destination, the more clearly I realized what a large measure of the unknown there was in our project. We had no idea what the country of monks would have in store for us. Would we even be permitted to make films of this small, isolated world? So far, no one had been able to give us any definite assurance. Even in Athens people had been ill-informed about Mount Athos.

We would soon be landing at Salonika. The plane began a wide turn and through a right-hand port-hole I saw the peak of a mountain piercing the mist. Unable to judge its altitude, I placed it in Turkey. The map told me it was Mount Athos, the 2,000-metre peak which rises at the tip of the peninsula called Aghion Oros—Holy Mountain.

I called to Georges and Gilbert, and we looked for the first time on the green and mountainous point where we were going to live. But the plane went on turning and the mountain disappeared.

Landing, we were back on the sun-hammered soil among the Greek people. We followed a dusty, pot-holed road and could see the peasants in their fields. With melancholy eyes they watched our bus as it sped crazily past the loitering donkey carts. It was an evening of humid heat, with a grey sky. Under the sparse pine trees and olives beside the road a whole population of women and children were moving about around iron bedsteads and linen spread to dry. They lived all the summer in the open, without roofs.

Salonika's suburbs, all dust and greyness, were not cheerful. A rickety tram, old and yellow, appeared to be abandoned in the

middle of the road, which was wide, badly made, interminable, *and on which jeeps and military trucks were moving. Bicyclists* bumped over the tram-rails and the holes. The many grey-clad pedestrians, all wearing caps, looked active in spite of the heat.

Salonika is a big port which has dwindled since the end of the last war. It was once an open port for Central Europe on to the Mediterranean, but nowadays its traffic is much reduced.

The old town huddles on a rise, and from the quay one can see its ramparts, vestiges of the Turkish occupation, and the muddle of its roofs which descend to mingle with those of the modern town below. The latter was rebuilt after the great fire of 1917 to the plans of a French architect, and is made up of wide avenues intersecting at right angles, bordered by buildings in a Greco-Moorish style. But the town still looks like an immense building site, with its waste land and dumps of material, and the dust which covers every house with grey.

Salonika is also the town where one finds the greatest number of Byzantine churches in all Greece, and the most beautiful. Like the old mosques built by the Turks and crumbling away from lack of care, they look forgotten in their little squares, among miserable trees with parched leaves. But, unlike the mosques, the churches are still alive. In the darkness behind their red brick walls they shelter beautiful golden frescoes and the blacks and browns of Byzantine paintings.

What we had to do next was to speed up our departure for Mount Athos, so each of us took a part in the quest for permits and a *laissez-passer*. We had already been granted visas by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Athens, because although Mount Athos is a part of Greece, it enjoys administrative autonomy. It is also a religious State, and only the Metropolitan of Salonika can grant a *laissez-passer*. In addition, we had to get permits from the police who at that time controlled all changes of domicile.

Our consul, who was very kind, gave us a letter of introduction to the Metropolitan: a most useful precaution since, it seemed, it was essential to have a recommendation before you could hope for a favourable answer.

I was the one who asked for the police permits, which I *received without any trouble. But when Gilbert* joined us later in the afternoon, it was to announce that the Metropolitan was away and that we would have to wait several days for his permission. The time could be used in making last-minute purchases and in deciding which means of transport we would take to the peninsula: the boat which sailed twice a week from Salonika to Daphne, the official port, or the bus to Erissos, the village on the frontier of Athos.

The 'Athos Line' turned out to be an ancient tub, a caïque of sorts, filthy and oil-streaked. We preferred the bus and decided to go at once and book our seats for the next Thursday.

The bus office was installed in the depths of a café. The 'booking clerk' was sitting at a table stacked with untidy parcels. We managed to make ourselves understood in spite of the din raised by the customers.

'Which days does the bus go to Erissos?'

'Every day. Have you got a *laissez-passer*?'

'We're getting it. We've applied.'

'Well, come back when you've got your papers.'

During the few days of our wait we put our equipment in order. Part of it had arrived by air from Paris on the same day as ourselves.

It amounted to over 400 pounds of baggage. The 35 mm camera with its accessories weighed about 75 pounds. We were also carrying a small petrol-driven generator for charging the batteries which drove the camera's motor. These were the two largest pieces in our load. Paper reflectors for interior work, a roll of drawing paper and our paint-boxes completed our equipment. Naturally we also carried camping kit, as we had no idea of how we were going to be lodged. It all made up a sprawling collection of packages and bags of different shapes and sizes, far from beautiful but easy to handle.

On Wednesday morning, the eve of our departure, Gilbert returned smiling from the cathedral.

'Here's the *laissez-passer*. The Metropolitan wished me a good journey and said that as soon as we get there we ought to go to

Karyes, the central village, and present our credentials to the Government of Athos.'

The next morning we took our baggage to the bus station by taxi, having fixed the fare beforehand in the proper way. The rest of the passengers were there already grouped round the door of the bus which was an old and jaded American truck. Several windows were missing and there was no longer any paintwork.

As soon as he saw our papers the booking clerk issued three tickets with no more ado. After a short argument about the tip Georges stowed our luggage on the top of the bus for greater safety.

Our fellow passengers were peasants, girls and three bearded monks who sat placidly with their hands folded on their umbrellas. To begin with the route to Erissos makes use of the road to Istanbul, a wide tarmac road which soon peters out in dust and holes. Then it turns off to cross the mountainous centre of Chalkidhiki which extends to the east in three points, the most northerly of which is Aghion Oros.

Until midday the bus behaved in a normal way, stopping at every village where we all got out eagerly to cool down. The younger passengers sang, others ate small sesame rolls. Whenever we passed a shrine at the side of the road they all crossed themselves three times.

After lunch one of the oddest journeys in my experience began. We were now going down the other side of the mountains. For three hours the bus made its painful way along a shocking track, scarred with enormous holes, which ran down a little valley cut between steep slopes with a few bushes and stunted trees. We noticed the burnt-out carcass of a car at the bottom of a ravine, and began to understand why our driver had an ikon of the Virgin stuck to his windscreen, complete with a little red bowl in which there burnt an electric bulb. The holy image was jostled by pin-up girls and pictures of American cars.

At four o'clock in the afternoon we thought the driver had taken leave of his senses. The bus began to follow the bed of a stream, then suddenly plunged into a wood for no apparent

reason. Soon we glimpsed the sea, sparkling behind a curtain of trees, and in a few minutes the engine was roaring as it dragged the heavy vehicle along a sandy beach towards the village of Erissos.

To reach this place, the frontier town for Athos, we had come just over eighty miles. It was the last centre before the holy peninsula, and nothing seemed to have been done to link the land of pilgrimage to the outside world. Erissos, a fishing village, did not even give the impression of being turned towards the sea.

Another quarter of an hour to reach the other side of the isthmus, the south side, and the bus put us down on the edge of a little beach. It was the terminus—and not a house to be seen. We were afraid there had been a mistake and asked the driver, who was already at the wheel again:

'Trypiti, is this Trypiti?'

'This is it.'

'And this is where we catch the boat for Daphne tomorrow morning?'

'Yes, yes. You'll be all right.'

There were, indeed, the rudiments of a café, but the proprietor went off with the few passengers from the bus in a caïque which had been moored to a wooden jetty. This was the only thing that allowed us to hope that we really were at Trypiti.

The bus went back to Erissos and we three were left alone, our only companions a dog and some sickly chickens. They seemed to be hungry and gathered round Gilbert while he prepared our dinner.

The sea here was bare. Not a boat on the horizon, only a few streaks of red and silver from the sun. The evening was warm and pleasant and we ate our meal at the table belonging to the abandoned café.

So there we were at last, on the threshold of Mount Athos: a moment we had long awaited and for which we had carefully prepared.

We would be leaving at dawn, so in order to sleep in spite of the heat we settled down under mosquito nets on the jetty

which, since it stuck out quite a way into the sea, would expose us to the breeze. Stretched out on the planks, some three yards above the softly lapping water, I gave myself up to the calm of nature. I could put my eye to the space between two planks and lose myself in emptiness, watching the grey and black shapes of the ripples which caught the moonlight.

The night was short. The weather changed suddenly and a storm drove us off the jetty. We took refuge against a wall, beside our baggage. Soon afterwards we were awoken again by passengers coming in from an island; then by others who were waiting, like us, to embark for Athos.

2. *On Athos*

THE CAÏQUE FOR DAPHNE, the official port, wallowed dangerously in the swell with its load of men. We would be seeing only men from now on. On board there were the owner of the boat, who was at the tiller, five monks including the three who had been on the bus, some workmen on their way to offer their services at the monasteries, and ourselves, silently enduring the boat's heaving.

I took shelter behind a fat monk with fair hair, thus avoiding being soaked each time the boat's rounded bows took a wave at an angle. There was no sound but the engine and the little girlish cries given by one of the monks whenever the water splashed his face.

We kept our eyes fixed on the great peninsula looming high above the water. The indented coastline seemed to stretch for ever towards the east in an endless succession of creeks and rocky points. We could still distinguish nothing in the dark green mass of woods covering the chain of mountains. Far away, right at the tip of the peninsula, was the summit of Athos, looking very much a proper mountain, its crown of clouds giving it the air of an inviolate peak.

The enthusiasm which had brought us thus far gave way to something like anxiety at the size of the territory. I was almost afraid of landing in case we should be met by an empty country, or by hostility which could put paid to all our hopes.

However, it was too late to worry. And besides, Docheiarou,

the first of the monasteries, had just risen up before us. Its size was on a scale with its grandiose surroundings. Spread out on a rocky promontory overlooking the sea, it made us think of a mediaeval fortress, except that it was dressed up with coloured balconies, mostly red and blue. The walls were topped with small brick buildings, with roofs and with a host of chimneys and red-painted domes. The colours harmonized perfectly with the ochre hues of the ramparts and terraces above them. One tiny black silhouette appeared in a sort of hanging garden, then Docheiarou vanished.

We had decided to disembark at the Russian monastery of St Panteleimon, first stop after Daphne, thus avoiding the formalities necessary at the port. We planned to leave our baggage there and go straight to Karyes, the capital of Athos and the seat of government.

While Docheiarou was built in a single block, St Panteleimon now appeared as a conglomeration of separate buildings, all large, which would have looked like barracks if they had not been surmounted by onion domes.

'The Russiko,' said a workman, nudging me. This is what the Greeks call the Russian monastery.

One of the barrack-like buildings gave on to the harbour. A monk was leaning on his elbows at one of the many windows and seemed to watch us with curiosity as we unloaded our voluminous baggage from the boat. Another monk disembarked with us, but he took no notice of us and went off towards the monastery, carrying a little leather case, his umbrella under his arm.

The caïque left and we were alone on the quay, happy to tread the soil of Athos at last, but rather doubtful as to what we should do next.

It seemed obvious that we should first introduce ourselves to the Abbot. But where would we find him? It was midday and everything was silent. The monk had left his window. There was no one at the door. Not a sound came from the sawmill, where freshly-cut planks leant up against the wall. A paved ramp, bordered with oleanders and fig trees, led up to a large

courtyard. To the left, steps with cast-iron lamps dated '1900 led to a monumental doorway which must be the main entrance. An old monk was sitting on a stone bench a little way off and we went over to ask him: 'The Abbot?' Pointing, he sent us on to another large building which rose up on the far side of a deep moat crossed by little iron bridges leading to wooden balconies stuck on to the grey façade. Most of the balconies were rotting and the loose planks creaked under our feet.

'The Abbot?' we asked again, of another old monk. He was shabby, dirty and wrinkled, and he laughed with the broad laughter of a Russian peasant. In answer to our question he led us away down long passages with whitewashed walls. Dragging his heavy boots with their worn heels, he spoke to us in Russian, looking friendly and amused and not bothering much as to whether he was understood. We had passed dozens of cells before he seemed to make a choice, opened a door and made us understand that this was where we could sleep.

We had to make several journeys to bring up our luggage, which left us hungry and thirsty. Hoping for something to eat, we began to hunt for our guardian angel who seemed to reign over the empty building like the guide to some historic monument after closing time.

The old man took us down to a basement, where we found a kitchen hardly lit by two air-holes. He opened enormous cupboards and fetched out a few tin forks and three cracked plates. Then he dug in a barrel bearing a German inscription and came back with a dish of stinking sauerkraut.

'From the time of the Occupation,' said Georges.

'Yes—and it's been fermenting for all of ten years.'

Besides this uneatable sauerkraut our host, always attentive, brought a few purple olives parched in vinegar and some slightly mouldy black bread which fell into crumbs when you cut it. He appeared moved as he watched us eat.

'American?'

'No, French . . . *Französisch* . . . *Francouse* . . .'

'*Da, da! Fransjskaja.* Ha, ha!' And he laughed his friendly laugh.

'May we pay a call on the Abbot?'

'*Morgen* . . . Good.'

After this scanty meal we went back, like prisoners, to our cell. Our footsteps echoed in the passages. A few doors were open and we saw workmen sprawled on their beds. We deduced from the monk's gestures that this building was used as a lodging for the workmen and was not a part of the monastery properly speaking, which we could only penetrate after having obtained special authorization from the Government of Mount Athos.

Our room was large and whitewashed, with a big Russian stove in one corner, decorated with tiles. There were three iron bedsteads, pretty thinly covered. Palliasses about half an inch thick lay on simple planks. This was going to be our way of living from now on. We could see the very pale blue sea out of the window. The silence overwhelmed us.

Early next morning, having explained to our friend that we were leaving him in charge of our baggage, we set off for Karyes light-footed, carrying nothing but our passports and our *laissez-passer*. Judging from a very vague map (the only one we had been able to find) Karyes, which lies inland, was not far from St Panteleimon—perhaps a few hours' walking. But it was on the other side of the spine of the peninsula.

As far as the crest of the hills we climbed through thick woods of chestnuts and acacias. When we reached the top we saw the sea again, and Karyes lying on the slope half-way between it and us. It was a little market-town, smothered in the surrounding greenery and looking, from that point, not unlike any French village. Its slate-roofed houses and official buildings with grey façades clustered round a church with a red-painted bell tower. We now followed a path through low scrub, bordered with little irrigation canals where the water ran and babbled like mountain streams. Although it was the hottest time of the day the air was fresh and made a pleasant change after the heavy atmosphere of the south side.

Farms—or rather, villas—spread out over the slope. Each

had its own water tank replenished from a fountain. Monks were working under their trellises or in their kitchen gardens. Everything breathed coolness and peace.

In the middle of the village we found the church and, standing rather back, the Palace of Government. It was a big house built of white stone and heralded by a huge stairway aiming at the monumental. The square was surrounded by little shops, most of them with their shutters closed. The centre was shaded by a group of trees. Little was going on at this hour. The capital of Athos, in fact, was a village on the scale of Lichtenstein or Andorra.

But it was not a village like any other. At first you did not quite grasp what it was that made it different. At first it was not particularly odd to see no one but black-clad men crossing the sun-drenched streets in the shade of their black umbrellas. But look at that other dark shape—a man stooping to the well to draw water in a movement entirely feminine. And that head appearing behind a balcony—a monk, again, busy with his knitting and glancing up from his work from time to time just like an inquisitive old village woman.

Everything here evoked peace. To what beneficial laws was it due?

The Holy Mountain has owed its present organization and its autonomy to the protection of the Greek Government since the treaty of 1920 (annexed to the Treaty of Versailles). A Governor, appointed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Athens, plays the role of Ambassador to the religious authorities of Athos, and a detachment of Greek police supervises relations between the civil and religious populations. Thus, before presenting ourselves to the Holy Community, we had to go and show clean hands at the police station.

It turned out to be no more than a matter of form. When we called at the big white-painted house where the police force was idling away its time, we were given our permits straight away, no questions asked. I doubt whether the monks give the police much trouble. Foreign visitors are rare, and perhaps

only an occasional workman gives the Law an opportunity to act. The atmosphere was careless, that of troops resting.

Nor was there any trouble at the Palace of the Holy Community, where we waited a good quarter of an hour before a cassock showed up, only to vanish again without a sound. Imitation marble pillars supported a ceiling decorated with shoddy plasterwork. A great staircase divided into two flights. And the only furniture in this very 'classic' hall was a table standing in a corner, covered with a cloth edged with pom-poms, and surrounded by benches of polished wood.

Our arrival, however, must have been announced, because after a while a young monk approached, carrying a tray, and offered us each a cup of Turkish coffee, a spoonful of jam and a large glass of water. Once this habitual rite of orthodox hospitality was over, he took us into an office where an old Father, with white hair and beard, welcomed us in excellent French. Then he took away the permits we had just been given by the police, the Metropolitan's *laissez-passer* and the permit from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We heard a typewriter rattling in the next room and he came back with a large white envelope for each of us.

'These are your *diamonitirions*. You must give them to the porter when you visit a monastery. And whatever you do, don't forget to collect them when you leave because you can't get into any of the communities without them.'

'Does it state on our *diamonitirions* that the Holy Community authorizes us to take photographs and films?'

'That is so. You will not have any trouble.'

We unfolded our *diamonitirions*. Our names were written in Greek characters on a large sheet of paper. In the top right-hand corner there was the seal of the Government of Athos, curiously designed in four equal parts.

'Is this the seal of the Holy Community?'

'Yes. It's in four parts and each Minister holds one of the quarters.'

'Supposing one of them decided to withhold his quarter?'

'Then you wouldn't be accepted on Athos.'

'Is the Government made up of four Ministers?'

'No, of twenty Abbots. The twenty monasteries on the peninsula elect them every four years. A council of four ministers, of whom I am one, looks after the administration.'

'So there are twenty monasteries in all?'

'Oh no, many more; but some of them don't rank as monasteries and therefore have no right to take part in the government. They are attached to other monasteries, like the little peasant communities which you will also see. You will find yourselves very welcome. Oh yes, I forgot—your *diamonitirions* will get you hospitality everywhere.'

'Do you mean that we will be fed and lodged?'

'Exactly. Where are you sleeping tonight? Koutlousmousiou?'

'No, St Panteleimon.'

'Then you have quite a way to go. And, as you know, the monasteries shut their gates at sunset. God be with you, and enjoy your stay.'

Before we left we went to the village inn—for there was an inn—to refresh ourselves with quite a pleasant new wine. A monk passing the window opposite us stopped when he noticed the photo-electric exposure meter lying on our table. He was a dark man with a big black beard. His eyes were lively and intelligent. He told us that he was a Rumanian and that he had once had an exposure meter like ours.

'In the old days—but now I don't do any more photography. It's seven years, now, since I came to the Monastery of St Paul. And what about you? Have you been in Athos long?'

'We have only just obtained our *diamonitirions*. We are going to stay several months.'

'And what do you mean to do here?'

'Travel about the peninsula and try to live with the monks in order to understand their life.'

'We plan to take photographs and make a film,' added Georges, always a stickler for accuracy.

'You'll find wonderful subjects, you won't be disappointed. They say that Athos is a Mediterranean paradise, and it's true.'

'Because of its climate and vegetation?'

'Yes, and because of its peace. I suppose you will be visiting all the big monasteries? There are not very many of us here nowadays, but that doesn't matter. All countries go through their bad times. The important thing is that the religious life of Athos still goes on.'

'How many monks would you say there were altogether?'

'It's hard to say—perhaps three thousand.'

'And so remote from the rest of the world—even from Greece! We realized that when we were getting here. Do holy men still come here, and people looking for solitude and prayer?'

'Yes, you will be meeting them. And you'll feel how calm and serene everything is. But it will be a long time before you understand them, or their life. They aren't accustomed to talking about themselves.'

'How is it that Mount Athos is kept only for religious life? Do you have to be a monk before you can live here?'

'There are a few civilians; Government representatives and workmen employed by the monasteries for the vintage and felling timber. But they don't stay. And no woman has ever set foot here.'

'Has it been like this since the beginning of Christian times?'

'Long before. Mount Athos was predestined. It was a holy place even in pagan times.'

'When did it first become a State—a republic of monks?'

'A long time ago. But we don't know much history on Athos. Monks don't trouble themselves about it. . . . We do know, though, that hermits and wandering monks have settled here since the first centuries after Christ in order to live out their faith in solitude and poverty.'

'What period do the great monasteries date from?'

'From the tenth century. And the man most venerated on Athos is Athanasios, who founded the Great Lavra—the oldest of the monasteries.'

'That's right to the north, isn't it?'

'Yes. And he laid down the monastic institutions which we still follow today.'

'Haven't they changed since the tenth century?'

'Hardly at all.'

'How did the monks live before him, before the monastic rule was introduced? One can barely imagine the peninsula without monasteries.'

'Athanasios made a real revolution. Before his time the monks—the hermits and wanderers—used to live in disorder and anarchy. They lived like savages in huts made of branches, and ate roots and berries.'

'But wasn't that just an advanced form of poverty and piety?'

'It was, as long as they stayed pious and didn't rob and fight each other.'

'They had no rule or organization?'

'Some of them grouped themselves into little communities called *lavras*.'

'That's what the name "Great Lavra" comes from?'

'Yes.'

'What did they do in these *lavras*?'

'The monks would meet in the church at the village of Karyes—where we are now—for the big feasts, but only then. It was Athanasios who made them build monasteries, work with their hands, pray at fixed hours and take their meals together.'

'And afterwards other communities were formed on the same model?'

'Not straight away. St Athanasios had great difficulty in suppressing revolt among the solitaries, who didn't want to renounce their independence. He eventually achieved it with the support of the Byzantine Emperor, who regulated the whole organization of the peninsula by a Charter. After that the various Orthodox countries had the right to establish new monasteries. They did so with great zeal and Athos became the chief centre of Orthodox monastic life.'

'Do the ancient forms of hermit life go on? Will we be able to meet any anchorites living in the woods?'

'Perhaps you may, but there are very few of them now. On the other hand you will still find the *kelli* derived from the *lavras*, and the *sketes*.'

'What are the *sketes*?'

'It's hard to explain—I don't think you have such things in your country. You could call them villages of monks. Look, you ought to go to Kapsokalyvia, at the tip of the peninsula, and see my friend Gregory. He could tell you all about it much better than I can.'

'We will gladly call on him on your behalf.'

'And if you visit the Monastery of St Paul, come and see me. I shall be very pleased. Now, you had better hurry, because you must be back at St Panteleimon before the evening. But you're young. Au revoir.'

I wondered whether we would meet more men like this one, serene, courteous and well-informed. We had so often been told that the monks of Mount Athos were ignorant that the encounter surprised us. Happy to feel that we were beginning to 'belong', we set off quickly for St Panteleimon, while the sun vanished behind the mountains.

3. *The Last Days of St Panteleimon*

THAT SUNDAY MORNING WE were woken by a curious cacophony of bells. It sounded as though they were all being rung at once and we could make out no rhythm or melody in the jangle.

Armed with our *diamonitirions*, we could now penetrate the monastery proper and were anxious to take part in the Sunday celebrations. The porter led us across a great silent court to the church, which stood opposite another sizeable building, the refectory. Through the half-open door of the church we could hear a grave murmur. Quavering voices chanted a monotonous Russian psalm in three parts.

We waited in the court until the Abbot, dressed in what seemed to be a very ancient purple robe, appeared in the door of the church flanked by two monks carrying lit tapers. Other monks came out in their turn, one by one, slowly, and their faces, suddenly illuminated by the intense sunlight, showed the characteristics of their race. They were all fine examples of Russian physiognomy, pale and bearded. The group went across to the refectory and we followed them in. The hall was immense and dark, with a high decorated ceiling. A large number of wooden tables were aligned between two rows of slender pillars. The Abbot took his place at the central table, one of the three which were prepared. Everyone sat down after him, and we installed ourselves at one end, with a group of four labourers.

No one moved until, with a tinkle of a bell, the Abbot gave the sign for the meal to begin. At one end of the refectory a

monk sat in a high-backed chair, with an eagle as a lectern, and read aloud in, of course, Russian. Everyone plunged his tin spoon into the gruel before him. The whole meal was already on the table: cold sauerkraut—no doubt the same as that we had already tasted—slices of salt fish, a hunk of black bread and small pewter jugs of wine, stoppered with a green apple. At every other place stood a curious glass-holder of carved wood, containing two glasses and a salt cellar. A big-bellied pitcher, sweating water, completed the cover which, in the hall's chiaroscuro, seemed to come straight out of a Flemish picture, less the cheerfulness and good living. The lack was particularly noticeable in the people sitting at the table. Under their black veils their faces were grey and thin with age. Some of them were failing and you could see their hands trembling as they broke their bread.

Another tinkle of the bell was the sign that we could drink, and everyone filled his glass. The wine was rough and strong, but good. There was some talking, in spite of the reading, but in whispers. I asked my neighbour, a middle-aged labourer who had worked at Creusot before the war and spoke French after a fashion: 'You have been here some time—do you know the different grades of monk? Does that black veil mean anything which they wear over their bonnets?'

'No, they all wear it for services and for meals. All the monks you see here are called *megaloscheme*, because they've been in the monastery for a very long time. There haven't been any novices for years. Russia, you know. . . . You can have *rassophores* and *stavrophores*, which are higher up, but there aren't any here. Do you know, the Abbot is the youngest of the lot? He's only forty, and he was the last one to come here.'

'Does he run the monastery?'

'Yes, and the two on either side of him are both *epitropi*.'

'What's an *epitropi*?'

'They're the ones next in order to the Abbot; the secretary, and the bursar who looks after the catering and the sale of timber.'

'Does the monastery do business?'

'Of course—we've all got to live. But it's very poor now and I can tell you—I've worked here for eight years—I can tell you that they've nothing left now but their timber. You can always sell wood in Greece—there aren't enough trees.'

A silence: the reader shut his book and went to prostrate himself before the Abbot. Then he left the refectory. We no longer liked to talk and the sound of cutlery clinking in the silence made the pompously decorated hall seem even bigger and emptier. A swarm of angels and saints were swooping from pillar to pillar on the arches of the ceiling. They were backed by sky and clouds in a harmony of blue and pink, and the rather over-grandiose pomp of a pure nineteenth-century décor made an odd contrast with the small number of monks assembled beneath it.

I had difficulty in eating my salt fish and had to swill down each mouthful with wine, my throat on fire. Everyone had to stop eating when the bell announced the end of the meal—too bad for the slow ones. One of the monks nimbly transferred an apple to his pocket, while my opposite number brought out a sheet of newspaper, wrapped up the remains of some juicy sauerkraut and stuffed it into the folds of his cassock.

The Abbot stood up and everyone followed his example. He went to a table near the door on which was an ikon, a censer and a basket of bread. Each monk took a crumb of bread, passed it through the smoke from the censer and ate it, bowing his head before his Superior, who blessed him. On the invitation of one of the monks we too did the same on leaving the refectory.

We were back, on almost empty stomachs, in the fresh air and sunlight of a hot summer's day. The monks scattered in small groups, soon engulfed by the great buildings rising on every side, severe and silent with their ranks of shut windows. In a few moments the courts had again become part of a dead town, and since we were left entirely to our own devices we had nothing to do but wander among its walls and terraces, trying to understand its layout.

The greater part of the monastery did not seem to be very old, apart from the massive church, surmounted by its eight

Byzantine cupolas, and the separate, slate-roofed bell tower which might have been equally old. Most of the buildings appeared to date from the nineteenth century, whose signature they carried, slightly monotonous and depressing. The most striking thing about them was their size. They had been designed for a large community—like the cauldrons and ovens we found in the huge underground kitchens.

We wandered from building to building, covering hundreds of yards of wide, silent corridors. 'Look at this!' exclaimed George , on a fourth floor, pushing open a door like all the others: 'another church!' It seemed most unlikely, at the top of a building of dwellings.

It was very big and could easily have held three hundred monks.

'You'd think the floor had been polished yesterday.'

'And the frescoes newly painted—look at the daring colours.'

'They can't be more than fifty years old, anyway.'

'Who on earth keeps it clean? Because I'm sure they can't use it any more, with so few of them.'

'If you ask me,' said Gilbert, 'these old men don't do a hand's turn to keep up their monastery. It's the dry climate and pure air that keep it all from falling to pieces. The materials don't warp, the paint doesn't crack. There's no dust here, like there is in Paris.'

Every now and then, one cell out of five hundred was inhabited. A man lived there alone in a building of five storeys. From outside, you could tell which cells were occupied by the signs of housekeeping: a plank laid across a balcony as a shelf, a checkered handkerchief hung on a piece of wire between the two flaps of a window, figs drying in the sun, or perhaps a balcony turned into a chicken run, with the fowl tied by the leg. One could guess at a whole life—an old bachelor's life—organized in the solitude of these buildings with the forest behind them and the always-blue sea beneath.

After we had made our way through a number of terraces and courtyards shaded by big chestnut trees, we arrived at the long, low stables, whose wide-open wooden doors let out cool,

St Panteleimon: the main church

Chilandari: the Secretary makes out our bill

In the caique taking us to St Panteleimon. This is the monk who squealed when he was splashed.

damp air. They, too, were empty. The few monks we saw went by like ghosts, without looking at us. Still hunting for signs of life, we were drawn towards the sound of stone on metal. In a huge workshop stuffed with a complete arsenal of enormous machines, lathes, work-benches and hundreds of tools hanging on the wall—enough to make a cannon foundry, murmured Georges—we found a single monk, lost in the shadows, sharpening a fork on the corner of a workbench. What an anachronism! He heard us approaching, turned, smiled at us and went on with his work.

'Well, we're not getting very far! They are kind and discreet—but if we go on like this we will never find out what they think, or why they've come here, or what discipline they've chosen for their declining years.'

'Don't be in such a hurry. We've only just arrived and we are being given the greatest freedom. They let us go where we like, and that's already something. And they are Russians here, so they wouldn't be so welcoming as Greeks. And anyway, we haven't asked them anything yet.'

'It was nice of them to let us eat with them. The monk in the kitchen said this evening we'd have supper in the Guests' Dining-Room.'

Georges and I were discussing our first impressions as we wandered up a slope deliciously shaded by eucalyptus trees. Gilbert, who said nothing, must have been following his own ideas, because when we were high enough to get an idea of the general layout of the monastery, he declared:

'Corbusier must have been here.'

'?'

'Yes—there really is a striking analogy between these buildings and the *Cité Radieuse* at Marseilles. Balconies used in the same way, running the length of each storey and used as sun-screens, and the same interior plan with a central corridor and rooms on either side, looking out on opposite façades.'

'The same sort of communal life and the same sort of climate —you naturally get the same sort of construction.'

That evening the three of us dined alone in the room kept for pilgrims and visitors. I have never been in Russia, but that room seemed to me to belong absolutely to the Russia of the Tsars. Brown linen curtains were drawn across the windows to keep out the heat. A diffused light bathed the cane furniture and the green potted plants. The ceiling was of stained wood and the floor was covered with a red wool carpet, while the panelled walls were almost hidden by pictures. The place of honour was given to Tsar Nicolas II and his Tsarina. All the monastery's Abbots were there, in sepia, gold-framed. There were also snow-scenes of big Russian monasteries and between the windows a photograph showing a number of venerable and bearded representatives of St Panteleimon grouped round a Russian admiral, all transfixed in the rigid poses characteristic of the period.

Our places were laid at the end of a large table covered with a splendid embroidered cloth and set with very lovely silver and glass. We were waited on in style by the hosteller, who wore a pyjama jacket over his habit. There was obviously no electricity at the monastery and we couldn't see the contents of our plates. Which was, perhaps, just as well.

Afterwards, when we wanted to go out, we found that the gates of the monastery were shut, and the hosteller offered us a luxurious bedroom for the night. A brick divan for sleeping on ran all round the walls. One candle and a few Russian books completed the décor in which we slept, without blankets or sleeping-bags, simply stretching out on the divan. It made us realize how much preparing for this journey had tired us. We slept soundly and late.

Next morning we continued our quest without the monks showing the least sign of interest or giving us any information. One small incident, however, hinted at their state of mind. Three monks were chatting on a bench, in the shade of a palm tree. It was an attractive scene and I wished to photograph it. In order to get it from the right angle I backed under a porch—perhaps I looked as though I were trying to hide. One of the monks jumped up, gave me a furious look and cried out, in

French, 'It's not right to photograph monks without asking their permission. All you French are communists.'

Georges, Gilbert and I gaped at each other, astonished by this sudden anger. The Abbot, who happened to be passing, saw our confusion and made a sign to us not to worry.

'Pay no attention to the Father.'

'But why? What did we do wrong?' we asked.

'It's nothing to worry about. You're foreigners, you're young and you come from far away. We are cut off from the world, and the Father doesn't want to be reminded of it.'

The Abbot appeared to be forthcoming and sympathetic, and since he spoke a little French we told him how we wanted to know more of the history of his monastery, and how surprised we were at the small number of monks in it.

'Does the Greek government prevent monks from coming here?'

'Yes, in a way it does—to St Panteleimon, anyway. You have to be Greek, now, to come to Athos. It is a long time since anyone came from Russia and our monasteries are emptying. Nearly all the Fathers here are over seventy years old, and it's the same in the Serb, Bulgarian and Rumanian communities.'

'So that of all the people on whom the life of Athos used to depend, only the Greeks can still come freely?'

'Yes, and we grow fewer and fewer. There were once more than ten thousand monks on Aghion Oros. Now there are only forty of us in this monastery, which was once the glory of Athos. You have seen the size of our house.'

'Yes, indeed. We have been all over it.'

'St Panteleimon was built for one thousand five hundred monks, not to mention lay-workers, Greek and Bulgarian, employed for various purposes. It was almost a town. You saw the sawmill down by the harbour. That's still working, but the printing and publishing works are shut now.'

'How did such a big community live?'

'By our works of art. And off our forests, too. And in the old days the Tsar would authorize a great collection throughout Russia every four years, which was very fruitful. At the end of

the last century our monastery was the richest and most powerful of all.'

'Most of the buildings date from that time, don't they?'

'Exactly. Almost everything you see today was built at the order of Nicolas II. It was an enormous undertaking. All the materials were brought from Russia by boat. The architects and painters and workmen were all Russian.'

The Abbot did not mention the fact that Russia's Mediterranean ambitions have always seemed threatening to the Greeks. We began to suspect that Athos had flourished formerly chiefly as a result of the rival prodigalities of the various Principalities and Powers who had wanted to make a show of strength and increase their prestige by raising and endowing such superb monasteries. The Greeks today must find the situation in Russia and Eastern Europe an excellent excuse to set themselves up as sole masters of the Holy Mountain and the last defenders of the Orthodox faith. But if that is so, what will become of St Panteleimon in a few years' time?

At this stage we wondered whether our visit was going to reveal anything except the reflection of past glories. Mount Athos, after all, owed so much of its importance and influence to the Orthodox countries surrounding it and now cut off from it. Were not its monasteries, deprived of new blood, doomed to death? But we remembered that of the twenty principal monasteries, seventeen were Greek and only three were Slav, and felt eager to find out whether the other communities prospered better and whether their life was more intense. And we still had to get to know the other forms of religious life peculiar to the Holy Mountain, survivals of the primitive forms. We had an encounter, during our stay at St Panteleimon, which confirmed the existence of solitary monks who roamed the forests, living by asceticism and prayer.

Towards the end of the afternoon we had gone down to the edge of the sea to refresh ourselves. The harbour was deserted. Just one monk was sitting on the jetty, his skirts tucked up and his legs dangling, mending nets. We were about to ask him: 'Going fishing tonight?' when Georges suddenly signed to us to

keep quiet. On the first floor of the building overlooking the harbour a monk was pacing up and down the balcony. He was naked—completely naked. He looked very old. Thin and bent, he was bronzed like a pin-up girl from the Côte d'Azur. His long hair was knotted, Iroquois-Indian fashion, at the top of his head, and his only garment was a cord tied round his waist. As he paced the balcony he told his beads. Suddenly he stopped, doubtless because he had noticed our unseemly staring, and stood hidden by some boards. In order not to disturb him we looked away. Calmly, he resumed his pacing.

Our fisherman went on examining his nets, knotting up the torn meshes. I asked him:

'That man on the balcony—is he from St Panteleimon?'

He shook his head without looking at me. He didn't seem very talkative.

'Is he a travelling monk? Where does he come from?'

'He's not Russian. He's a Greek,' the monk deigned to reply, in a mixture of French and Greek. 'He lives near St Anne.'

St Anne is a little collection of houses marked on the map, right at the end of the peninsula, which we meant to visit later.

'Does he live in the village?'

'St Anne isn't a village, and he lives all alone in the woods. Perhaps he lives in a cave, or a hut—I don't know.'

'But what's he doing here?'

'He was hungry. They only have the woods to feed on, nuts and roots. Sometimes they come down to the monasteries to get other things.'

' "They?" Are there more of them?'

'Yes, but not many of them live like that. In the old days there were many.'

'But does he go naked all the year? Is it because he's too poor to buy clothes?'

'No, it's because he likes to live like that. We're free here, and that's his way of loving God—alone and poor.'

Clearly the naked monk had made a vow of poverty and wanted to live as simply as possible. That which other men enamoured of sanctity do by contemplation in monasteries, by

charity or by evangelism, he carried out in his own way, alone and stripped of all possessions. A way inconceivable in our country and made possible—one might say natural—only by the exceptional conditions reigning on the Holy Mountain: conditions of climate, state of mind, politics and religious situation. In this place there seemed nothing shocking in his conduct.

The monk, becoming more talkative, went on:

'There was a time, Monsieur, when there were no monasteries on the peninsula and all the holy men who came here lived in that way. Poor, with no resources and no houses, living off the woods and the gifts made them by passing fishermen. And praying, of course. They were happy like that.'

Our fisherman seemed to regret those days and as for us, we began to be impatient to delve deeper into this great peninsula and its silent woods. Tomorrow, we decided, we would leave for Chilandari, the Serbian monastery, with our baggage on our backs like the pilgrims who still come today to accomplish their pious devotions.

4. *Chilandari, the Serbian Monastery*

CHILANDARI, UNLIKE MOST OF the monasteries on Athos, stands inland and not on the coast. It is quite a long way west of St Panteleimon, at a distance from the other monasteries which are grouped nearer the summit of Athos, but its position and its architectural beauty make the detour worth while.

We left early in the morning in order to get there by nightfall. Still unaccustomed to long walks with our packs on our backs, we stooped under our loads. The heavy stuff, such as the 35 mm camera, the generator and the film, was left at St Panteleimon, but in spite of severe pruning our packs still weighed over fifty pounds each. We climbed through the thick woods which covered the slopes. The path twisted and turned, at first shaded by large chestnuts and then, higher up, by low-growing acacias and oaks. The heat was still moderate and at first we came across little springs whose waters were caught and held in basins. Silently, in Indian file, we plodded on, conscious of our muscles already becoming stiff and of the straps of our rucksacks biting into our shoulders.

After several hours of climbing the path came out on the first cleared and cultivated plateau. A recently-built church stood there alone, unexpected in this rustic setting, and behind it there hid a little convent with closed shutters, which had the look of a country school during the holidays. It appeared to be uninhabited and no one answered our call, though a dog barked far off in the fields. Weeds were beginning to grow among the

paving stones but the whole thing had the cared-for look of somewhere from which life has only recently withdrawn. We resumed our journey westward, leaving this abandoned place to its solitude.

Later we met a monk perched on a telegraph pole. He was examining the insulators, hanging on with claws fixed to his feet. Over his bonnet he wore an improvised eye-shade made of a grubby piece of cardboard. As soon as he saw us he waved and came down from his perch, delighted to find someone to talk to.

'*Kalimera,*' he said.

'*Kalimera.* . . . Are you installing the telephone?'

'No, only doing maintenance work. We've had the telephone for fifty years. It's my job to watch the condition of the line. It's something to do, and I'm on my own.'

'Does the line go all round the peninsula?'

'It links all the monasteries with Karyes. There are about a hundred and fifty miles of it and it's rough going.'

We had, in fact, noticed the line strung through thickets and across valleys, and he must have had quite a scramble to follow it.

'Yes, it's hard work. But that's how I like it. I'm free. At night I sleep at the nearest monastery, or out of doors. And when I've finished my round I begin all over again. The telephone must work—we need it.'

He nodded good-bye, gave a last look at the pole he had just left, and we watched him walk away with a curious duck-like gait, waddling in such a way that his strange spurs would not catch his ankles. A happy man, conscious of his responsibilities, and free. His life was simple and hard, but he looked serene.

The path now followed along the crests of the hills which tumbled before us towards the mainland. The vegetation was still more or less the same, though we were too high for the woods and were walking under the open sky. The view was wide and we could see, to the left, the blue mountains of Macedonia and, to the right, those of the island of Thasos. On the north coast, on a bay edged with a white beach, stood Vatopedi, a large monastery whose red roofs sang out against the dark trees.

We tried to trust the map, but it was not very reliable. Only the torrents and streams seemed to be marked accurately, and we had a hard time finding the traces of pathway. We came across signposts here and there, where the path forked, but the washed-out wooden boards were impossible to decipher, and they seemed to indicate the direction of the wind rather than the way.

Further on, to our left, we overlooked Zographou, another monastery which raised its vermilion cupolas skywards like children's balloons. If we had not been literally crushed by the heat and the sun, the going would not have been too bad. We were still too far from Chilandari to rest.

By two o'clock the whole landscape, inundated by intense sunlight, had lost its colours. Wild thyme and flowering bushes poured out their scent. We could hear not the least sound, no stirring of animals in the dry grass, no buzzing of insects. The peninsula was dead and the horizon had disappeared in a heat haze. On either side, white clouds rose up from the sea and invaded the hills. Everything became misty and vague. In spite of our sun glasses we could hardly bear to look at the white pathway, and distances had faded away in the monotone of too strong a light. Only the sky immediately above us remained blue.

We had expected the walk to take eight hours, but in spite of our eagerness to get there, our stops became more frequent and I began to fear that night would catch us still on the road. Collapsed, pouring with sweat, Georges and Gilbert would throw off their packs and rest, with their heads in the shade of little trees which couldn't shade the whole of them. As for me, the muscles of my back were aching horribly and I would stretch on the gravelly earth fidgeting to find a comfortable place for my hip-bone. We talked of nothing but drink, but there were no more springs and our reserves had long since been finished.

Suddenly we gave a cry of joy: four cypresses rose up above a little dry-stone wall which surrounded a shelter roofed with slate. It was a well, shaded from the sun, containing marvel-

lously pure and cool water. But it was like being in a dream or an adventure story; we had no cord with which to let down our mugs. Not until five o'clock in the evening, when the soles of our feet were burning so much that we hardly dared put them to the ground—not until that moment of infinite discomfort did we at last discover, in a wood, at the heart of a little valley, a big spring surrounded by a flock of goats. We dropped our packs. Every man for himself, without a word spoken, we plunged our mugs in the water and drank in huge gulps.

Once the first satisfaction was over we realized that the flock was composed, in no uncertain way, of billy goats, and that they stank appallingly. There were at least two hundred of them. The ground was muddy, trampled by the animals coming to drink. But what did we care for the décor or the smell.

Georges and Gilbert brought out a can of condensed milk, which they consumed in one gulp, but it was to lie heavy on their stomachs. We ate a little bread and some raisins. I suggested that we should each have a big mug of cold water mixed with an American lemon powder which we had despised in France but which in these circumstances became delicious. It was a simple recipe: one of lemon powder to three of castor sugar—which, in the course of our stay, became almost our staple diet. We ended by consuming almost two pounds of sugar every three days.

Replete, our stomachs bulging, our eyes glassy, we sat in the mud dangling our hands in the water to absorb a little more coolness, still surrounded by stinking billy goats. The orgy ended with a cigarette.

A little later, when the sun was setting, we came slowly down into a valley where, at last, we saw through the trees the high ramparts and watch-tower of Chilandari. The temperature had become tolerable and we were walking more lightly when we took the last short-cut leading to the gates of the monastery. We had been on the road for eleven hours; it was high time to arrive.

Chilandari's setting is really idyllic. At the bottom of a wide valley, some miles from the sea, it is surrounded on all sides by

forest, which must once have concealed it from pirates and other treasure-fanciers. Its containing wall, oval in plan, was slate-topped and its tower, crenellated in a military style, had a debonair look. There was a chapel with a belfry perched on its slate roof. In front of the fortified entrance was a big cobbled yard, edged with chestnuts. Sleeping donkeys harnessed to empty carts stood by the gates. We could hear a cock crowing, a chair being dragged over a tiled floor, and we could feel the presence of those who lived here. The porter was busy painting his lodge a very ugly green, and chickens were pecking about him. With a friendly smile he asked us to come in, and when he read on our *diamonitirions* that we were French, he put down his brush, wiped his hands on his working cassock, and with a truly ecstatic look began to drag us after him almost at a run: 'French, French, come . . .'

We went through three enclosures, three little narrow white-washed courts, each shut by wooden doors strapped with iron and studded with the rusty heads of big iron nails. To the first was fastened a large wooden knob, the size of a man's head, as a knocker to be used at night, in cases of urgency. The inner court was empty, but one could feel at once the intimate life of a small community. There were no cloisters, no galleries with columns, as at Fiesole or the Grande Chartreuse, but dwellings opening on the court with many blue-framed windows, freshly painted, their Byzantine-style façades harmoniously aligned and striped with alternating courses of brick and stone.

'French! Secretary!' went on the porter, leading us up to a wide staircase of red wood. 'Secretary! French!' he said, to make us understand that the Secretary spoke French.

The Secretary, a small, dark man with black eyes and a clear skin, very well dressed, met us kindly at the top of the stairs.

'We Serbs,' he said, 'are very fond of the French. We haven't forgotten what they did for us in the 1914 war. We like to have visits from them, and you are welcome to stay here.'

But we understood that Chilandari was very poor, so we reached an agreement with him by which we paid a small sum for our keep. We went on to talk of Millet, a French architect

well known on Athos who had, during the 1914 war, made plans of several of the monasteries, particularly of Chilandari, and had taken many photographs of the frescoes which we had looked at a hundred times before leaving France.

The room in which the Secretary offered us the ritual cups of coffee and glasses of water was filled with traces of a past epoch. The walls were covered with engravings of Serbian princes and donors, of the great battles of the Serbian liberation and of folk dances. Here, as at St Panteleimon, they seemed to want to ignore changes of régime and frontier. These people, too, were exiles, separated from their country for ever.

'We would very much like to call on the Abbot, but perhaps it's too late, this evening, for a visit?'

'We have no Abbot at Chilandari. We have a President, elected by the monks, but he's away at the moment and I am in charge of the monastery.'

'But there was an Abbot at St Panteleimon.'

'Yes, but St Panteleimon is organized differently from us. It belongs to the coenobitic rule.'

'Does each monastery have a rule of its own?'

'Each monastery is free and independent as far as its internal organization goes, but all the Athonite monasteries follow one of two forms of religious life. Either the coenobitic, that's to say living in common, as you saw at St Panteleimon and will see again at Dionysiou and St Paul, for example, or the idiorhythmic rule—ours—which is a rule by which everyone lives his individual life within the community as they do at Vatopedi, the Grand Lavra, Iviron and Pantokratoros.'

'We knew that there are two ways of life, but I must say we would have been hard put to recognize them. Everything here is so different from Roman Catholic monasteries.'

'It's simple. The idiorhythmic monasteries like ours have a democratic régime. The monks are independent of each other. They live in private apartments with their own chapels and can make their religious observances alone. We only join together for the great feasts and for solemn offices.'

'And in the coenobitic monasteries?'

'It's more like a monarchy. The Abbot directs the monks, and they live in cells and are held to the discipline of life in common. And they have given up all their possessions and own nothing of their own.'

'Like in the monasteries at home.'

'Yes, I think so. They are nearer the religious life of the West.'

'But the idiorhythmics keep their property?'

'Indeed they do, and they have to look after it as well as possible because on their death everything they own goes to the monastery. Some of them even own land—farms outside Aghion Oros, which they manage.'

'So that's how the monasteries came to be so rich. Since we've been here, we've often thought that such buildings must have cost a great deal.'

'Certainly. But you mustn't think that the monks themselves financed the building. Our monastery, for instance, was financed by a Serbian prince who was himself drawn to the monastic life. He wanted to make Chilandari a very great monastery. It was he who provided the money and he who obtained from the Emperor Alexis III—it was in the twelfth century—the right for the kings of Serbia to keep up and protect the community.'

'Was it like that for all the monasteries?'

'It used to be.'

'And now?'

'Now, it's different. And now we have all been dispossessed of our exterior possessions. We have to live on what we've got. But we are free.'

From that first evening we liked Chilandari. There were about thirty monks, we found out, but we felt less lost than at St Panteleimon, and the friendship and goodwill of the Secretary was invaluable from the point of view of getting information. It must be remembered that we were like nineteenth century travellers who, with no guide-book, had to find their way through a maze of the unknown with nothing prepared for their reception and information. Like them, we had only our curiosity

to guide us and could only be enlightened by encounters with other men. But it was often difficult to establish such contacts with the monks, whether because of indifference or ignorance it was hard to say. Perhaps a bit of both.

The fact remained that we wanted to see everything and understand everything about the sumptuous buildings which today still bear witness to the astonishing and tortured history of the Orthodox world since the fall of the Byzantine Empire. When it came to judging the artistic riches shut away in the monasteries, we were on our own and without advice. It was difficult to make a choice between all these buildings of different epochs, all these churches and dark chapels stuffed with icons, brasses and carved wood, all these great refectories with their fresco-covered walls. At Chilandari, in order to triple our chances of finding something interesting, we each wandered off separately, meeting fairly often in the cell of a certain Father Athanasios who knew how much we enjoyed a little glass of new wine. We had first met him while we were taking photographs of the frescoes in the refectory when he, our neighbour, had come to visit us and had later offered us one of the satisfying wines produced on Athos. After that, whenever we felt thirsty, we only had to pass in front of his windows and he would come to greet us with well-filled glasses.

One day Georges called to me from a balcony on the third floor:

'Come and see the Holy Trinity. It's really marvellous.'

I went up and found him by the door of a private chapel, contemplating a relatively recent painting under glass. The reflection of the light on the glass prevented me from making out the subject.

'Look, come over here,' said Georges. 'What do you see?'

'Christ.'

'And now look at it from straight in front.'

'And now it's God the Father.'

'Now from a bit further to the right.'

And from that point of view I saw the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove. I went backwards and forwards several times to

convince myself of the reality of these apparitions. God the Father was, in fact, painted on the panel at the back, while Christ and the Holy Ghost, painted on thin strips of board, were arranged in such a way that they appeared when the picture was seen from an angle.

'That's pretty good, the three persons of the Trinity in one, there's no missing the point.'

'If only all the mysteries of religion could be represented so simply!'

'I call it very ingenious.'

'Me too—these monks know how to simplify life. Apart from that, what's new?'

'Well, I've had a drink with a monk. He must have been feeling bored, because he was waiting for me on his doorstep when I made my round.'

'Did he speak French?'

'No, but he obviously wanted to be friendly. I had to drink *raki* from a filthy glass which lived on the floor. His room was very dirty and dark—I don't know how anyone could live in it. No lighting, not even an oil lamp. Just one tiny window in the thick wall. And he was pretty dishevelled, with no shirt on under his cassock, which was open. But friendly. He showed me a relief map which he must have made himself, with his native village in Dalmatia.'

'It's incredible how little they live on. It must be frightful in the winter—imagine it, with no heat and no light and these draughty corridors which make one feel at night as though one's at sea on an old cargo boat. The Secretary said that the winds are icy and that when it snows they can't do anything but stay curled up in their cells. It makes one shiver to think of the night offices.'

'Luckily the summer is long.'

'Yes—it's lovely now. Where's Gilbert?'

'Down in the courtyard, painting.'

In the silent court two cypresses framed the *phiale*, the little edifice with columns that sheltered a great stone vase full of holy water. A few yards further away the church loomed

enormous with its lead-roofed cupolas surmounted by the Orthodox cross in wrought iron. Once one was inside, however, it seemed quite small, squashed between its thick walls and encumbered with wooden pews and brass candelabra.

We spent several quiet days at Chilandari. As the Secretary had told us, the monks were free, each one his own master. The gardener, for instance, ruled over his flowers, the family of tortoises which lived in his cistern, his orchard and his kitchen garden. He, however, had some community feeling, because he supplied vegetables to the other monks who did their own cooking in their rooms. One day, when we were visiting his garden, he was hailed by the Secretary who let down a basket on a string from his window high up in the ramparts. The gardener, a grumpy but nice man, tall, stout and strong, dropped his pea-sticks, stumped over to the foot of the wall and filled the basket with a little pile of beans and tomatoes which he had already prepared. It was hoisted up again and that evening, when we dined with the Secretary, we were able to enjoy Greek beans—very stringy, but unquestionably fresh.

One got the impression that life in the monastery had not changed for centuries, and I doubt whether anyone had ever thought of introducing any technical improvements into the material organization of the place. 'That's not what we are here for,' objected the monks to whom we mentioned this. Naturally they had found ways of sparing themselves fatigue, like pulleys to lift wood to the upper storeys—but beyond that, the wonderful natural conditions of the peninsula took care of things. Thus the water supply at Chilandari was really remarkable and I should not be exaggerating if I said that they had running water laid on. An ancient aqueduct, still in use, brought water down from the mountain. It ran round the interior of the monastery through lead pipes installed by the monks. Lead being pliable, the pipes hung in lamentable loops between their too-widely spaced supports, up and down the corridors and in the courtyards. Individual pipes took the water to the balconies, where it ran into stone tanks from taps which were never turned off. From there it fell directly to the bottom of the walls, where

it filled the irrigation channels in the garden. From the outside, the monastery made one think of a gigantic barrel with holes pierced in it, spurting endlessly.

Although Chilandari now seemed to us barely alive, we did not doubt its importance in the days when it was kept up by the princes of Serbia and enriched by its monks, and when, if pirates often cruised in its neighbourhood, it was in the hope of finding treasure. So when Avakoum, the keeper of the museum, offered to show us round, we were full of impatience and curiosity. Avakoum, an amiable, ruddy-faced lad, was not a little proud at displaying his domain. I took my camera and, almost as excited as Avakoum, we entered the room on tiptoe.

It turned out to be almost empty and so dreary, with its two show-cases in the middle and its grey cupboards against the walls, that we looked at each other nonplussed. Avakoum went on playing his part as guide, but in Serb, of which we understood not one word. He led us round to see coats of mail, helmets rusting to pieces, arrows and dusty quivers. Was nothing left but the arms with which the treasure had once been defended? Ikons of poor quality hung on the walls. Apart from an old tapestry of mediaeval design, decaying slowly, there was nothing of interest in the museum. Avakoum locked up again with great care and we left, disappointed.

So much for the museum. But however splendid the history of Chilandari may have been, it only interested us because of our efforts to understand the people who had come to live there, and the few who still lived there had no history. They seemed to have found happiness in the half-comfort of a simple and rough life, in the silence of their private chapels and in the tranquillity which came from knowing that they were fulfilling their destiny. We relaxed to the rhythm of peaceful and carefree days, and were sorry to leave. We had to move on eastwards, to see Vatopedi and other monasteries.

5. *The Problem Before Us*

A FEW HOURS' WALKING from Chilandari, we came to Esphigmenou, a little monastery rebuilt in the last century, without many interesting features, standing like a fortress on the edge of the sea. We spent the night there, very well received—some of the monks were Albanians, who have a great sense of hospitality. While we were enjoying a copious dinner—the best and biggest since our arrival—the hosteller gave us the benefit of his erudition. The monastery, one of the oldest on Aghion Oros, had undergone many vicissitudes. Pillaged several times by pirates, attacked in the eighteenth century by the Turks and almost wholly destroyed, it was rebuilt thanks to a number of Moldavian princes. The monk reeled off the facts as though tradition prescribed that someone, in the midst of the general ignorance, should preserve their memory. Indeed, we found in almost all the monasteries a 'bard' who perpetuated the history of his house.

That night we slept in a positively theatrical setting. Our huge, low-ceilinged room was magnificently placed. It looked straight out to sea through six small mullioned windows. Leaning out, you saw that the walls rose directly from the water. We could hear the roar of the waves breaking against the ramparts and the sound of the swell which came up through the walls and made our floor shudder. With the windows shut, this growling became thoroughly impressive. The setting sun dyed the sea with mauve and green.

At about nine in the evening, while it was still light, we all three froze, and listened. We had heard something which seemed, in this place, quite unreal: the sound of an engine. We rushed to the windows and saw a twin-engined aeroplane flying abnormally low over the sea. One of the engines was smoking and we doubted whether it could get over the mountains towards which it was heading. When it disappeared behind the monastery we held our breaths, waiting for an explosion. Nothing happened, and the sound faded away.

This apparition made an odd impression on us. For the first time we realized the bewitching power of the silence in which we had been plunged since we arrived on the peninsula. Without knowing it, we had become used to a state of inactivity and contemplation in the vast calm of nature, carried along by the slow rhythm of the lives of the monks. We lived as they did—but suddenly, woken up by a noise, we realized how far we still were from detachment from the outside world.

We made a careful note of the time, in case there should be an accident.

Everything became quiet again. Stretched on our beds, which were nothing but planks covered with a red material, unstuffed, we allowed ourselves to be wrapped in the heavy silence pulsing with the rhythm of the waves.

Next morning we harnessed up again. We crossed the drawbridge with heavy feet and empty stomachs, breakfast having consisted of a tomato and a cup of coffee which could hardly have been called black. The day promised to be very hot.

We had now visited three monasteries inhabited by men who were foreign to Greece, and they had made a sad impression on us; an impression that we had met only men of the past, forgotten by history, abandoned by their native lands, confined on an island with their antique virtues, their beliefs and customs of bygone days. Vatopedi, where we were now going, was Greek. Perhaps Vatopedi would be more alive, more of the present.

Our road was not easy. It zig-zagged along the coast and sometimes, to avoid following the contours of the many rocky points, it climbed the heights and plunged down to the beaches.

It must have been a long time since anyone had done any work on it. Perhaps it had once been a real road, in the days when there was plenty of traffic between the monasteries, but now the stones which paved it, Roman fashion, were either buried or heaved up by the earth, and although the stone edges of the steps were spaced in a way which would have exactly suited a mule, they were extraordinarily inconvenient for us.

Feeling far too weak for four or five hours' walking, we made ourselves a second breakfast from our stocks. Throughout our visit we were obliged to supplement the monasteries' diet in this way. An ascetic régime may be all very well for people who take no exercise, but it is hardly ideal for people walking as much as we did—and besides, we were surely the only people to wander about the peninsula with such burdens on our backs.

At the top of a ridge we came face to face with a young monk riding side-saddle on a mule and singing a profane song. He fell silent as soon as he saw us, and looked away, as though he were embarrassed at having been surprised in such a cheerful mood.

At a bend in the track Gilbert suddenly yelled: 'Look! A jackal!'

'Where?'

'To the left.'

We threw off our packs and tore down the slope through the scrub where the creature was bounding and scuttling, vanishing towards the sea. We hunted it with the urgency of foxhounds. Desperate, it turned at bay and crouched a few yards from me, showing its teeth—not encouraging. Then it dashed off up the hillside. Exhausted, I shouted 'I give up!' Georges and Gilbert did the same, and we looked at each other, all three completely winded and streaming with sweat.

'Some athletes!' said Georges.

'You know, I'm sure we're under-nourished,' added Gilbert, in all seriousness.

But it was no moment for gloom, and I suggested a bathe. We had plenty of time and there was a beach at our disposal.

'Good idea.'

Our naked bodies stretched on the sand, among the logs thrown up by the sea and whitened by the sun, would have looked just the thing in a surrealist film by Bunuel.

This halt refreshed us, and when we saw Vatopedi at the end of a long beach drawn like an arc of a circle along the edge of a bay, we cut down to it across the fields, jumping fences and feeling like schoolboys on holiday.

Vatopedi, which is built on a promontory at the mouth of a little river, looked like a mediaeval village. It has a stronghold in the centre, many little houses nestling round it, and gardens and orchards sloping down to the sea and along the side of the valley. The harbour, below, seemed to be full of activity. Mules, hardly visible under their loads of wood, came down from the forest to the stone jetty where a dignified and well-dressed monk noted each load in a little book. On the beach were labourers in tattered singlets and trousers, who sweated in the sun as they carried the wood to the caïques anchored nearby.

We climbed up to the monastery by a narrow, twisting alley between low houses, most of them empty and falling down. One of them housed the duty policeman—found in all the big monasteries—who was leaning on his window-sill watching others at work with the peaceful eye of a just man.

A cobbled terrace stretched in front of the ramparts surrounding the monastery. Some monks, perched like crows in the branches of a nut tree, were knocking down the nuts with long sticks, while others, down below, made great work of picking them up one by one. Some fine pigs rooted in the manure accumulated in front of the stables. A thin cat slid across the terrace and vanished.

The entrance to the monastery was shaded by a pompous porch supported on two columns, with arched windows on either side, rather like certain porches in the suburbs of Paris. The windows were filled with stained glass which threw dismal mauve and green reflections on the ground. It was the only entrance and slender-legged mules, carrying stocks of wood for the winter, went through it at the same time as we did.

The porter was also the grocer. On the shelves in his tiny lodge dried fish jostled biscuits, candles and the varied assortment of goods typical of a village shop. His manner was cold and rather off-hand. Without getting up, he reached through the hatch for our *diamonitirions*, examined them rapidly and sent us on to the visitors' hostel where we were received as though in a really bad country inn. Foreigners did not seem popular, and we felt embarrassed by the unfriendliness after the warm welcomes of Chilandari and Esphigmenou.

Vatopedi is modern. It has electricity—supplied more or less constantly by a broken-winded generator—and western time. Till then we had thought that all the clocks on Athos were out of order, but we were mistaken. Mount Athos lives according to 'Byzantine time'—that is, eight hours behind us. By this method it is twelve o'clock at sunset—and every five days the monks regulate their clocks according to the sunset which, of course, is changing all the time. Only the monks of Vatopedi have adopted western time—called 'Frankish time'—as well as the Gregorian calendar; all the other monasteries keep to the old Orthodox calendar, thirteen days behind ours.

Vatopedi, still fairly lively, is the 'tourist' monastery—not that anything indicates that Athos is destined to play a big part in this way, for the present anyhow. Mediterranean cruises stop there. The ships anchor in the bay and only the men go ashore. I doubt whether anyone can learn much from a one-day visit to a single monastery, but Vatopedi is a fine and typical example of the architecture of Athos, and the visitor at least glimpses one of the most interesting communities of the district. The multitude of little balconies, green, red or blue, clinging high on the walls, with flowers and drying linen in their windows, are enchanting; so are the red-painted church and the little chapels scattered about the courtyard. A cat crosses a sun-drenched alley, pigs wander freely on a terrace—and Vatopedi takes on the look of a miniature out of a Book of Hours.

After St Panteleimon, Zographou, Chilandari and Esphigmenou, we were becoming familiar with the architecture of Athos and were no longer so taken by the 'picturesque' aspect

of the things we saw. The appearance of a building now indicated to us the splendour of its history and the competitive policies of former princes and emperors with regard to it. What we really wanted to know was the spiritual condition of those who lived in it—what sort of faith moved them.

We had now lived among the monks for quite a time and we were still ignorant of the elusive inner life of their communities. In a western monastery it is easy to grasp the rule by which the monks live, coming together at fixed times as they do, in the refectory or chapel; here we were at a loss to understand the way in which religious life was organized.

Vatopedi appeared to be thinly populated. It seemed like a house of retreat, where everyone organizes his own life according to his taste. As at Chilandari, the monks lived in small separate apartments of one or two rooms, plus a kitchen and, almost always, an adjoining chapel. They seemed to be isolated from each other, each one free and his own master. You saw them crossing the courtyard in the evening, basket in hand, to do their shopping at the porter's lodge, and you felt them all the time, each in his apartment, busy about the little tasks of a bachelor existence. It was all very remote from the monastic life as we conceived it, and we wondered what the essential elements of the idiorhythmic life could be.

One day, when we were visiting the refectory, we met a young and forthcoming monk with bare feet and rolled-up sleeves, who was washing the tiled floor of the empty hall. The tables were made of marble with little walls built round them on which boards had been laid to guard against the coldness of the stone. The monk greeted us in English.

'How are you?' he asked, with a cockney accent.

'Well,' answered Georges, taking over the conversation.

'Do you come from the United States?'

'No, we're French.'

We learnt that for a long time he had been a sailor and that New York had been one of his most frequent ports of call. He also knew Le Havre. He was a talkative man who seemed bright enough, so sitting on the tables we chatted with him in an

attempt to draw him out with simple questions and discover more about the monastery's secret life.

'Do you work a lot in the refectory?'

'No, there's never anyone here. Meals are only served here on Sundays and feast days.'

'So the monks eat at home all the other days?'

'Yes, in their own apartments.'

'Can they eat what they like? And smoke?'

'Yes, except on feast days.'

'Does everyone observe them?'

'Of course.'

'Do you often have to fast?'

'Oh yes!' he answered, woe-begone at the thought. 'On the eve of all the festivals, and there are lots of them. It comes to a hundred and fifty days a year. But it's nothing to what the other monasteries have to do.'

'The ones which have the coenobitic rule?'

'Yes. They never eat meat and they have all their meals together. And their rooms aren't nearly so good, either. They live in little cells, and they don't have private chapels. All the monks have to go to all the offices.'

'And here?'

'It's not compulsory. You can stay and pray in your own chapel.'

'Do the monks celebrate mass in their own chapels?'

'Only the ones who are priests—and there aren't very many of those.'

'What do you do?'

'Oh, I do all kinds of work. I help out. I haven't got enough money to live on my own, so I work for the community.'

'But you are a monk?'

'A novice.'

'Do you want to become a priest?'

'Oh, I don't know. It's not too bad like this. I pray and I work. The important thing is to be honest and live a poor and simple life like our Lord showed us how.'

'And you came to Vatopedi to do that?'

'Yes. After the war I had to give up the sea and I couldn't get work. My mother's brother was here. I came to visit him and I stayed on.'

What he said reminded us of the poverty we had seen in Greece; the countryside with its arid soil and its villages too poor to feed their inhabitants; the migration to the towns and the ceaseless quest for a job there.

We left our sailor to his work and his calm and began to be more wary of judgements made without an attempt to understand the motives for an asceticism which we found surprising. We had to remember that most of the monks, who were often from peasant families, had lived in little patriarchal villages such as we had seen before we came to Athos. They didn't need any particular instruction in order to be accepted by the monasteries; the rule insisted on no kind of preparatory studies for the acquisition of education—even religious education—because education means little in the spiritual development of a monk of Athos.

But why were they here? Was it just to find quiet and security? Or the peace necessary to prepare for their salvation? Or, in some cases, just to escape from difficulties in their ordinary lives?

What we kept coming up against was the oriental spirit revealed by the monks. We were questioning in the western way, with our intellects, and they made no other answer than that of the example given by their lives.

6. *Byzantine Faith*

WE TRIED TO JOIN in the life of the monastery as much as we could. Between matins and vespers, when the courts were swamped with heat, everyone stayed at home and we were received sometimes by one monk, sometimes by another. They were kind but we were unable to learn much from them since they often seemed to be either ignorant, indifferent or discreet.

One day we went to the four o'clock office called the Liturgy. A monk took us to the door. He left us there, however, because, he said, he 'had work to do'.

The church's gilded doors, usually shut, were now wide open. From inside came the sound of chanting, but the contrast between the darkness within and the dazzling sunlight without was so strong that at first we could see nothing. A monk who came in behind us invited us to go up to the choir with him. He slipped into a big stall of dark wood, and signed to us to do likewise. We found ourselves just under the central cupola where the blues and golds of the frescoes gleamed in the dim light from the narrow windows. Candles were burning in front of the rood-screen. A priest in canonicals was intoning, standing before a double lectern bearing two fat holy books. He chanted; another monk made the responses in the same slow monotone. Their voices seemed worn by years of religious exercise. A congregation of about a dozen was scattered about the stalls. Most of them were old men with long white pointed beards—very oriental-looking. The youngest was past forty. Their

decent and tidy black robes made us embarrassingly conscious of our informal get-up.

The reading went on and on to the same sad rhythm. At the end of each verse all the monks, who stood with their arms supported on elbow-rests, answered 'Amen' and bowed their heads towards the altar. With their stiff movements and in their long habits they were not unlike marionettes. One of them, just opposite me, who looked young and well preserved, kept stroking his beautiful black beard and seemed to be distrait in the way he followed the service. Then he polished his nails on the revers of his robe, holding his hand in a ray of light from time to time, to see how they shone.

The officiating priest walked round the lectern to read from the second book. The monk who was giving the responses went and sat down and another rose and took his place, without the intoning being interrupted. You could feel that every act and gesture of this solemn ballet had been fixed for centuries and that those performing it were acting mechanically. It seemed as though they were not listening, as though their spirits had floated off elsewhere. One of them—really exceptionally hoary —suddenly left his seat and went to whisper in the ear of a neighbour, who answered by nodding. Then he went quietly back to his place.

I too was letting my imagination wander as, one by one, I scrutinized the faces of these thin old Greeks. One would have to live with them for a very long time to understand their mentality. If I had recalled at that moment the rigorous and well-ordered lives of the Catholic communities I knew, theirs by comparison would have seemed neither serious nor intense and I might have felt that the monasteries of Athos were slack and decadent. But one ought not to compare two kinds of communal life which, at bottom, differ profoundly.

The monastic life of the Athonite monks, which seems to us so surprising, corresponds to a different conception of the divinity, a different way of practising religion, due to the oriental temperament and the particular character of the Orthodox Church. Between a Byzantine cupola and a Gothic

arch, between a monk of Athos and one from the Grande Chartreuse, there is a whole world of thought and the several centuries of history that separate the two Churches: that of the East and that of the West.

Nothing has changed on Athos since the thirteenth century. No new idea has penetrated. Mount Athos has remained outside the main currents of ideas and its organization, rites and customs have become set. Mount Athos was made in the image of the Orthodox Church. Bound up with the Byzantine Empire, the Church shared its fate and its decline. At the time of the fall of Constantinople, disturbed by diverse and contradictory spiritual tendencies, she found herself without direction, and through the three centuries of Turkish occupation she turned in on herself, withdrawing from life the better to defend herself. Freed from the Turkish yoke, she reappeared unchanged, paralysed in the forms of primitive Christianity.

The history of the Western Church is quite different. After the dark ages of barbarian invasion a new western civilization elaborated itself around the papacy, and at the Renaissance the Church of Rome took the lead in history. Assimilating new tendencies of thought, she continued to adapt herself to the development of men's minds and ways of thinking. Thus the divergence between the two faiths separated by schism in the eleventh century, and also by the difference between the western and eastern temperament, was further accentuated in the course of history by the development of the one and the stagnation of the other.

The Liturgy had already been going on for over an hour and we could see no reason why it should ever stop. So we slipped away discreetly, having probably little more to learn about the order of the service.

We were anxious to visit the library, which was reputed to be one of the richest on Athos and which would be hard of access to us, as to everyone.

Straying down the corridor which led to the tower where the famous manuscripts were shut away, we happened on an *Epitropi*

who confirmed that the librarian was away. 'Let us in yourself. We'll wait here while you go and get the key.' Half an hour later he came back carrying a huge key and we followed him up to the first floor, into a very small dark room with a good smell of leather and dry wood. Net curtains covered the narrow windows, hardly admitting any light, and we could barely see the volumes arranged in the big showcases in the middle of the room. The Father, without stopping, led us up to the next floor and a little room identical with the first. He went straight to a case and took out a very beautiful manuscript Bible. The miniatures with which it was decorated were quite different from mediaeval French art. Instead of luminous reds and golds, the pages were embellished with pastel colours. The greens, reds and blues were pale, very delicate. The monk then put before us a copy of Ptolemeus' Geography. The mis-shapen maps of the Mediterranean were coloured in the same way as the miniatures. Towns and ports were shown by little red-roofed houses. We wanted to examine and admire every detail, but the *Epitropi* hurried us towards the door. With great insistence we were able to persuade him to show us one more Bible, very ancient, and a little leather-bound book—a herbal—in which every page was a model of taste and charm. Each flower or herb was represented in the most minute detail, coloured, and surrounded by an explanatory text on the way to plant it, water it and care for it. In a corner of each page a little figure, naïvely drawn, was planting, pruning or grafting it.

Our guide showed not the least interest in the things he was showing us, and we questioned him, to find out what he thought.

'I suppose you know by heart all your predecessor's works?'

'Oh no. And they were gifts made to the monastery.'

'How many books are there?'

'Eight thousand volumes.'

'Who is responsible for them? The librarian?'

'Yes, he puts down moth-balls so that they won't get spoilt.'

'Isn't there danger of fire, with all this woodwork?'

'It happened at Chilandari, twenty years ago. The library

went up in flames. Since then the Greek government has made us take precautions.'

'Is that why the library is always locked?'

'Yes, it's safer like that.'

'Have you had any trouble?'

'Yes, we don't like showing it to strangers, because we have had things stolen. They have taken pages out of manuscripts to keep as souvenirs, and we've never got them back. Since then we've had to be careful.'

'Do you ever come to work in the library?'

'No, why should I?'

'But don't novices have to study texts and the writings of the saints?'

'No one here cares about studying.'

'Supposing one wanted to get some information on Vatopedi or on Mount Athos generally—is there a catalogue, or at any rate a list of what these shelves contain?'

'No, nothing's been done.'

'Why don't you undertake it? Not for lack of documents or time!'

'But why? Our stay here is only a short one on our journey towards eternity. Others will take our places tomorrow.'

'Couldn't your knowledge be of service to them?'

'It's our business to pray and to fulfil our duty towards God. Anything else is superfluous.'

That was clear enough. Books were not made for them nor would they help them towards salvation.

As he turned the key the *Epitropi* set a little bell ringing inside. It was to give the alarm at any invasion of the library.

These treasures of illumination and manuscript, guarded so well, served no purpose. At least the monks of Athos had kept them safe from generation to generation, preserving their works of art from war and pillage, while so many others have vanished like the manuscripts used by the Coptic monks in the desert, who tore out leaves to cover their oil jars. But I began to understand why so little is known about Athos; no other land so disdains its own history. When one thinks that even the

Acts of Foundation of certain of the monasteries have never been examined or published, one has to admit that such detachment is worthy of a society whose allegiance is not to the temporal.

It has been said— nd I am prepared to believe it—that the monks of Athos consider human knowledge useless and even dangerous to faith. That, doubtless, is why the libraries of the Holy Mountain are entrusted to illiterates, who cannot be contaminated by them.

Yet again we realized that these monks conceived of religion in a state of mind very different from our own. By 'living his religion' a westerner means understanding it, in order to know it better and put it into practice. The easterner means experiencing it in inaction and allowing himself to be guided by it intuitively; associating it with his human condition, rather than raising himself, through it, above his own limitations. It seemed, here, as though a monk fulfilled his faith best by taking on his human condition to the full, within the limits of a good and simple life. He had nothing to do with civilization and the world of perpetually changing thought. He confined himself within the application of time-honoured rules which he knew by heart, and thus best prepared himself for his journey into the beyond. All of which seemed, to us, vague and abstract.

7. *Market Day*

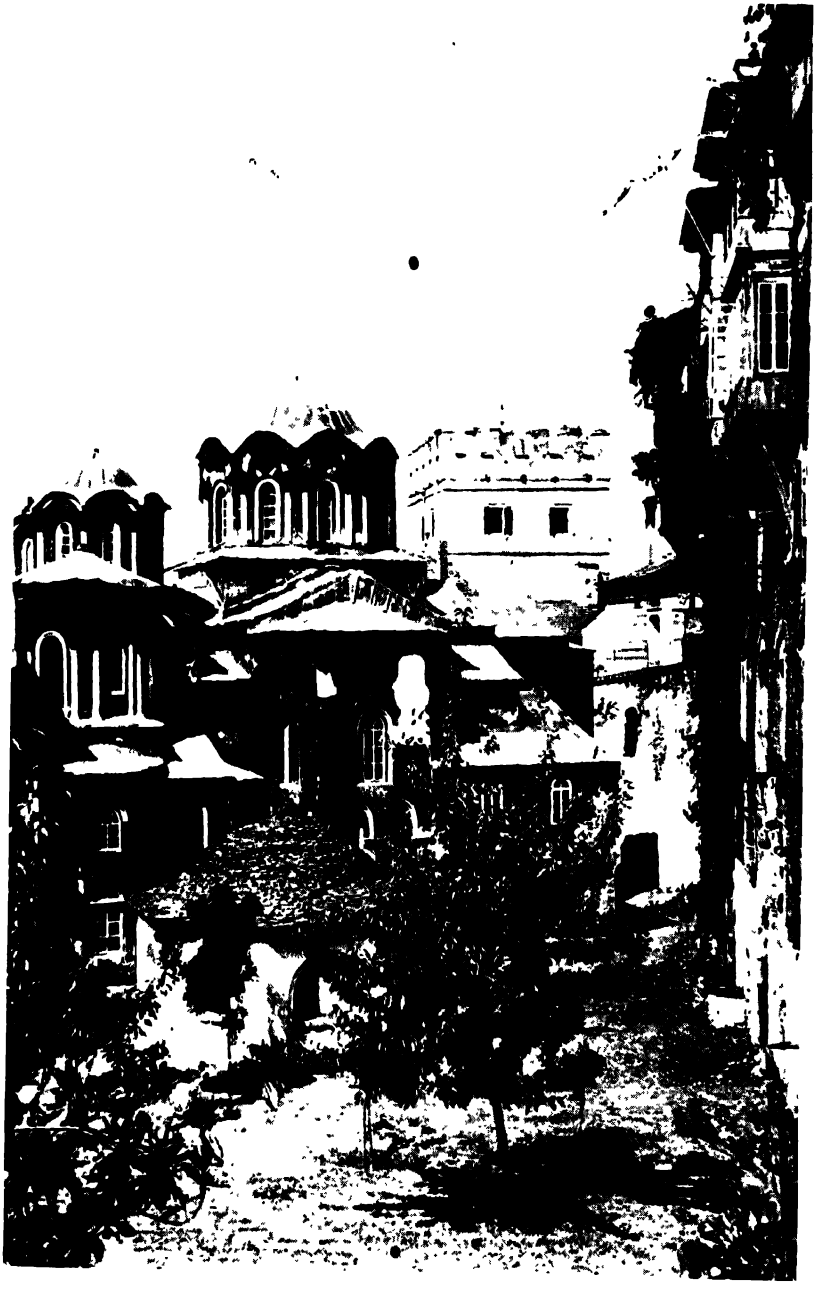
KARYES WAS THREE HOURS' walk from Vatopedi and the only place where we could replenish our stocks before going on to the tip of the peninsula, to the Great Lavra and the *sketes*.

The path up to Karyes from Vatopedi ran through woods and there were plenty of springs to help us bear the heat. We arrived at the Karyes plateau near the community of St Andrew, a Russian settlement recognizable by its onion domes, which seemed to be deserted.

A quarter of an hour later we came into the square at Karyes and found it *en fête* for the annual market day. All the little shops, which had been shut when we were last there, were now open. Donkeys and mules were dozing, their noses to the walls.

It used to be almost impossible to move in Karyes on market day, for the dense crowd of monks. Now, however, the streets were far from being full. Only round the Protaton, the chief church, was there a good deal of activity. Black-clad monks came and went in a sort of round-dance under the black umbrellas which they were using as sunshades. There were some laymen about, too; Greek workmen who crowded into the village's two cafés. We left our baggage in one of them before going to do our shopping.

A young grocer with the beginnings of a beard offered to serve us. The way in which we gravitated towards foodstuffs was yet another indication of how undernourished we were. By



Vatopedi: a courtyard with its painted balconies and fruit trees

Karyes: three monks from the other side of the peninsula, who had walked a long way to attend the annual market

the door of the shop were big gaping sacks, spilling out the hazel nuts which the inhabitants of Athos eat without cease. We, too, fell on these nuts, from which Karyes takes its name, and which abound in the woods. Round about the village there are whole orchards of nut trees.

The shelves were stuffed with candles, oil lamps, wicks, tapers, soap, bags of flour and dried fruit. But we were particularly drawn to the tinned foods, mostly American, and from behind the counter we dug out a few boxes of French sardines. Georges got hold of several tins of corned beef, battered, tarnished and some of them without labels. We bought the lot. Too bad if, on opening some of them, we found them full of boot-blacking.

The market was going on outside; an odd market, extraordinarily quiet. The monks scattered about the square and the streets were gossiping in little groups. Some of them, sitting on a stone wall, or standing, without tables or stalls, held things in their hands. They were selling to other monks objects they had made themselves, ingeniously laborious handicrafts. With their greenish cassocks and bare feet in wooden-soled sandals, they looked like so many furtive hawkers. One of them was holding a few spoons and some little ladles patterned with poker-work. Several dozen rosaries of many-coloured shells hung on his arm. One old man had put some shoes made by himself on a chair; rough workmanship, but solid and conscientious.

At the end of the square, near the Protaton, other monks were displaying a series of ikons, a sort of diorama in wood. One of them, pretty ancient, came up to me with a benevolent look and offered me one of these ikons. Then, suddenly, he regretted his gesture and seem to become embarrassed at having so indiscreetly offered the product of his labour. A most peculiar silent colloquy went on between this man, embarrassed at selling his work, and me, who didn't want to buy it. I took it to look at it more closely. It was a little rectangle of wood, about a quarter of an inch thick. Successive layers of wood were gouged off with a stylet, giving the impression of superimposed planes.

On the first of these Our Lord extended His arms, standing out against a sheaf of rays which symbolized His power and divinity.

You find quantities of these ikons on Mount Athos; a sort of miniature in relief, into which the monks put long months of work. There is never a detail missing in the faces or the minute aureoles. The subjects are invariably taken from the Bible or the lives of the saints and they are highly academic, copies without individual inspiration. Often their only value lies in the number of working hours they represent.

One monk was installed in front of the wooden shutter of a shop, where he had hung some socks and sweaters knitted in natural wool. A tall fair monk, a very handsome Slav type with his hair hanging about his neck, was on the point of buying one of the sweaters. He held it up, measuring the length of the sleeves with slow, luxurious gestures. He was not quite sure. The seller took him by the waist, held the sweater against his chest, made him stretch his arms, did everything to convince him. Very picturesque, they looked: the salesman monk and the tall, fair, gentle-looking man who did not like to say no.

Georges suddenly popped up beside me, a ribald look in his eye and his camera in his hand.

'I've just taken forty photos of beards. It's the most magnificent collection I've ever set eyes on. It's sensational! Do look at them, you'll never get another chance like it! Look at that brown curly one and that pointed one. And there's one like a waterfall, with a reddish tinge . . . and that fan-shaped one. . . !' He rushed away, went up to a monk and greeted him gravely, evidently asking permission to take his photograph. The monk, with a smile, at once stood to attention. Little did it matter whether the pose were natural or not—the beard was everything.

I went into a shop selling pious objects, with a window worthy of the place St Sulpice. It was dark inside and smelt of some kind of incense. The walls were covered with showcases of dark wood, full of rosaries of black beads, crosses, ikons, ex-voto offerings, brass candlesticks, taper-holders and other chapel furniture. Painted images of Orthodox saints were piled

on the counter. The monk hoped he would be able to sell me his whole stock, thinking at first that I was one of the brokers or exporters who flood the Orthodox countries with pious 'souvenirs' of Mount Athos.

Georges, Gilbert and I all met again for lunch at the café. We ordered the *plat du jour*, a stew of mutton and potatoes in a viscous gravy. Only the new wine pleased us, and we drank plenty of it.

There were only laymen in the café. The monks who went past the open windows pretended not to see the place. A workman who heard us talking French couldn't resist his desire to show off his knowledge of our language. He was called by everyone 'Mister Voui'. They all listened eagerly.

'*Voui*,' he said, 'I was in the Legion, *voui*. You know Paris? *Voui*, I live here on Athos, *voui*. You like it, *voui*? I've done some fighting, too. . . .'

We soon got tired of his monologue. 'Voui' never allowed us to get a word in, and if he spoke French badly he understood it even worse.

Beside him was a skinny little old man with pointed ears and a pink face, who watched him all the time and slipped in a word every now and then in a flutey voice. He was a eunuch. 'Voui', with vivid gestures, explained to us his companion's tribulations during the Turkish occupation.

The meal over, we went to visit the doctor at the hospital, the existence of which we had just learnt. Though 'hospital' is over-stating it a little . . . a first-aid post installed at Karyes by the Red Cross in spite of the monks' objections. The doctor, a small man in his prime, seemed pleased to see us. He took the chance to complain of the monotony of his life; it was over a year since he had seen his wife and children. He had been sent to Karyes by the Greek Government, by whom he was employed as an official doctor.

'Don't you have a lot of work here? Are the monks often ill? We find the Spartan diet very hard to bear.'

He answered with a smile:

'Yes, the food in the monasteries is neither good nor plenti-

ful. All the same, there are very few sick people on Athos. During the winter I get them coming in with colds or sore throats, and one or two of the monks who work on the land have heart trouble through being under-nourished, but for most of them an illness is just an excuse to leave the monastery and visit their friends.'

'Do you visit them in the monasteries?'

'Not often; I stay at the hospital.'

'But how can they keep well on such a restricted diet?'

Our astonishment amused the doctor.

'It seems to me that the light diet, with hardly any meat, is just what ensures their good health, particularly those who lead a life free of physical effort. I've never noticed that salt fish, which is their basic food, has any ill effects.'

This lasting good health is part of the Athos myth. We met a hermit later who also boasted that no one was ever ill in this privileged place, and the longevity of the monks of Athos seemed to bear it out.

The doctor then suggested that we should visit a group of painters who worked in a nearby studio. Still talking, we followed him.

'We haven't been here very long and there are still a lot of things we don't know. I've had the impression—up to now—that the religious life in the monasteries is not very intense. Am I wrong?'

'It seems to me, too, that there's very little live feeling for religion in the big communities. You can feel the hardening of habit and tradition which has become a dead letter. It may be different with the hermits—but I hardly know them.'

'Where do they live? People are always telling us about them.'

'At Karoulia—a cliff between Kapsokalyvia and St Anne.'

'Are there many novices in the monasteries?'

'Very few.'

'It seemed to us that some of the monks had rather special feelings towards each other. . . .'

'Well, you know, it's bound to happen in an exclusively

masculine community. I don't think it's very important. After all, they're quite free and can do as they like, particularly in the farms and the *sketes*, and in the idiorhythmic monasteries too. . . .'

'Are there many homosexuals?'

'Quite a number.'

'But they are free to leave the peninsula, aren't they? They can go to Salonika if they wish?'

'Yes, indeed. And they find plenty of pretexts for getting away from their monasteries. Some of them are sent out to sell the work of the communities in Greece—the ikons and so on made here are very popular. Buyers even come here to take their pick, on market days like today. And of course the monks are always having to come to Karyes because that's their only shopping place. The monasteries are mostly self-supporting, particularly as regards vegetables and meat, but they have to get imported stuff from Karyes: kitchen utensils, haberdashery, manufactured goods. And of course it's here that administrative matters are settled with the Holy Community. And each monastery's patron saint's day gives them a chance to move about, which they look forward to with impatience. You must have noticed how one is always meeting people on the roads, even though there are so few inhabitants.'

Two soldiers came reeling towards us, obviously feeling the effects of the new wine.

'They get terribly bored,' explained the doctor.

Arriving in a little street some way from the centre, we went into the painters' studio through a glassed-in terrace with a wide view over the surrounding country and, in the distance, the sea. We were received by the venerable Father Constantine. A young monk quickly brought the inevitable glasses of water and little cups of coffee on a tray, and after a short palaver we began to talk painting. The doctor acted as interpreter. Our unexpected visit brought in other monks, the artists, all enjoying the excitement. After a while old Father Constantine began to talk at length, stammering and anxious, and the doctor translated:

'The Fathers are very anxious to visit Paris.'

'We will be delighted to see them there.'

'But they daren't come.'

'Why not?'

'The Father wants to know whether it would be all right for them to appear there dressed like Athonite monks, or would they get laughed at in the street?'

'Tell them not to worry. No one would take any notice.'

Other monks joined in the conversation and we warmed up on the subject so near to their hearts. Their eyes shone and they listened attentively to our answers. The doctor, indefatigable, went on:

'The Louvre is open every day except Tuesday. We will show them round.'

The Giaconda, French painting. . . . They seemed staggered by the idea of all the beauties they would discover if this journey ever came off.

'In Paris, next year!'

'*Kalimera! Au revoir! Bon voyage* and thank you.'

Towards the end of the afternoon we had to hurry our departure because there is nowhere to stay in Karyes and we wanted to reach the monastery of Iviron before nightfall. In order not to find the gates shut we stepped out, bent yet again under our packs and our bags of provisions.

8. *Intermezzo*

IVIRON IS ON THE sea, at the mouth of a little valley, and we clambered down through flower and vegetable gardens. We soon came up with two young Greek workmen who were annoyed at being overtaken by foreigners. They in their turn overtook us, and we began to race with them. Our walk became a mad rush down to the bottom of the valley, each group trying to outstrip the other. We bounded from rock to rock, twisting our ankles as we went, and this little game brought us to the gates of the monastery, soaked in sweat, just at closing time, when the porter had already begun to push the door shut. He looked astonished when he saw our scarlet faces, and couldn't understand what had happened to us or why we were so out of breath and excited. We were even beyond speaking.

In the 'hotel' part, kept for pilgrims, we met a boy of Russian origin who lived in France. He was on a pilgrimage and was visiting the big Russian monasteries. We exchanged information about our journeys and our experiences, not only on Mount Athos but also in Greece, and his point of view, very different from ours, helped us in our discovery of Athos.

We talked chiefly of the situation of the Russians in their poverty-stricken monasteries, and of the unfriendly welcome they had given us.

'It's not surprising. All French people are disliked in the Russian monasteries. You see, the monks know the size of the Communist party in France, so all the French are suspected of

Communism. I have had the chance to talk with them a lot. They are in a really deplorable situation. They are cut off, with no contacts with the outside world. They are dying one after the other and no one comes to fill the gaps.

'To give you an idea of their state of mind I'll tell you something that happened at St Panteleimon a few years ago. The Russian Embassy in Athens approached the Greek Government with a proposal straight from Moscow, asking permission—in spite of the xenophobe laws of 1920—to send two thousand monks to Athos. The Russian government wanted to restore conditions on the peninsula to what they were before the First World War, when there were one thousand five hundred Russian monks in St Panteleimon. The Greeks turned the suggestion down, but they made a polite delay by pretending to consider it. During that time the Secretary at the Soviet Embassy asked if he could visit the Holy Mountain. They didn't dare prevent him, but everyone on Athos was petrified. Fear of Communism is something quite irrational with these people who are so withdrawn from the world. And in addition to that the representative of Russia advertised his opinions in his dress: he wore a red tie and a red crocodile belt.

'To everyone's amazement his attitude was that of a practising—even a bigoted—Orthodox Christian. He kissed ikons with ardour, which always pleases people here, and crossed himself three times every time he got the chance. It was so unexpected that it won him enormous popularity at St Panteleimon, and at St Andrew, too. They still swear by him.'

It appeared that the French were equally unpopular in the Greek monastery of Iviron. At any rate, one day when, in the hope of seeing the treasures, we accosted Father Athanasios the librarian, the gaoler of the monastery's manuscripts, he gave us a dirty look and positively attacked us.

'You are French?'

'Yes.'

'Are you Catholics?'

'Yes.'

'How can you be Catholics with a government like yours?'

'. . . ?'

And then, in a furious voice:

'A flock without a shepherd!'

'But why? We have the President of the Republic.'

'What's the good of a President! A king, now—that's a guarantee of morality. A Republic is as good as anarchy—and anyhow, you live like animals.' To clinch the argument he added: 'You're cosmopolitans!'

'. . . ?'

He stumped away, muttering to himself, so yet again a library proved to be inaccessible.

I must not, however, give the misleading impression that everyone on Athos was out of date and lived in ignorance of the world. Many of them still had contacts with the world outside and received visits. Some of them were even very up to date. One day, when we were climbing a hill to get a good photograph of the monastery, we met an old monk sitting on the kerb of a spring and holding his mule by the bridle. He hailed us waggishly in English: 'If you're from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, you'd get a better view from that rise, over there.'

We thanked him and assured him that that was just where we were going.

When we got back that evening we found two Englishmen, travellers like ourselves, who had come from the Great Lavra. One of them was a clergyman, who looked as though he found his cassock altogether too much. It was unbuttoned except at the waist. While we were swapping details of our itineraries, the Secretary half-opened the door to announce dinner. The speed with which we made for the dining-room revealed our appetites. As usual, the soup was already on the table.

Gilbert: Have you smelled the soup?

Jacques: An aroma all its own!

Georges: But all the same, I'm jolly hungry. . . . What can it be made of?

Jacques: Here's a bit of meat.

Gilbert: No it isn't. It's rotten fish.

Georges: I'll have a try. . . . Oh Lord, it's awful.

The clergyman: Do you know the sauerkraut at Panteleimon?

All: Do we know it! So they gave you that, too?

In spite of our excellent intentions the soup went cold in our plates. Laughter, then an embarrassed silence when the hosteller came in to ask us with a smile: 'Was the soup all right?'

We thanked him. He could take away our plates—which he did, looking worried, unable to understand our not eating food on which he had lived for years without a second thought, and with no ill effects.

We handed each other olives as though we were warming up our appetites for a formal dinner, eating them with a great deal of bread.

After a silence the clergyman said thoughtfully:

'You know, six months on this food and then, one day, you'd drop down dead.'

That evening we went to bed empty. We had to keep our supplies in reserve.

9. *The Great Lavra*

WE SPREAD THE MAP on the table to see how far we had got in our tour. Between St Panteleimon on the south shore and Iviron, where we now were, on the north, we had hardly left the middle part of the peninsula and the neighbourhood of Karyes where most of the monasteries—with the exception of Chilandari—were grouped. Now our curiosity extended to the summit of Athos, life in the *sketes*, and the Great Lavra, the oldest of the monasteries, isolated at the northern end of the peninsula.

The journey would be easier by sea, but at Iviron they told us that the few boats which sailed along the north shore hardly ever went as far as the Great Lavra because it was too remote from the other monasteries. To cross to the south shore would get us nowhere, since no sailor or fisherman would agree to take us round the dangerous north cape where the sea was always rough. Yet again there was nothing for it but to walk.

Although our long walks in the sun had tired us, we left Iviron early to make the journey in one day. We followed an arid and unattractive shore, plodding on in silence for hours like old mules, without coming across a living thing, or even a spring. We had long finished our supply of water for the day when we at last reached a canalized spring near a shack built against some rocks. In this shady and peaceful corner two monks—very attentive to each other—had come to roost. They peeped out as soon as we arrived, happy to talk and eager to be civil. One of them went to fetch plates for our lunch. They had

made themselves a real little farm, and the younger was bringing in the hay for winter fodder. They even had some chickens and, laughing, we tried to ask them whether they were allowed to keep female creatures and eat eggs. Our conversation, carried on in pantomime, must have looked amusing. They made us understand that the breach of the law was not a very grave one —and that anyway, they were so far from any supplies.

They had a story to tell us connected with this inflexible rule against the presence of women on the peninsula. With much use of gesture and of English, Greek and even Russian words, we ended by understanding that we were on an historic spot. Something very important in the history of Athos had happened near the spring where they had built their house. I translate as closely as I can:

It was here that Athanasios, the founder of the Great Lavra and the great reformer of Athos, came to rest one day when he was full of grief. All his early companions had left him because they were unable to stand the privations and the rule of life imposed on them by their leader. One by one they had gone away, leaving Athanasios quite alone. Not knowing what to do, he also had left the Great Lavra and had come down to sit here, beside this spring. It was then that a woman appeared to him. Without thinking, the Saint reproached her violently for intruding on the Holy Mountain forbidden to women. Then he fell silent, out of countenance and ashamed. He had just realized that the woman was the Virgin. She ordered him to carry on with his mission, to go back to the monastery and to stay there. She promised him that his disciples would return. Then the holy apparition vanished. When Athanasios got back to the Great Lavra, he found the kitchens full of food and the cellars full of stores. The other monks came back and set to work, making this monastery the biggest and richest on Athos.

We were sorry to leave the two monks and the restful murmur of the stream, and to continue our walk in the torrid heat. It was not until sunset that we reached the Great Lavra.

While all the other monasteries of Athos look like fortresses, the Very Great Lavra (as it is called on old maps), built on a

plateau, is a town of little houses surrounded by an enormous crenellated wall with towers at intervals, rather like Carcassonne. The fortified enclosure is a long rectangle, about 550 yards long and 250 wide. Inside the monastery you find alleys and little squares brightened by trees and fountains whose basins reflect the sun. In the main square, inevitably, the church rises on one side and the refectory on the other. Its squat appearance, its windowless walls and its low cupolas reveal the church's antiquity. Doubtless it was built by Athanasios' monks, but it seems to have been restored more than once. A sort of false arcaded narthex, whose ecclesiastical windows bear the hallmark of the nineteen-hundreds, precedes the old porch and protects the wall covered with frescoes.

The sun flooded the square and played on the trees and the colours of the frescoes on the refectory's walls. Two enormous cypresses, said to be a thousand years old—to date, that is, from the monastery's foundation—threw black splashes of shadow on the pavement of the court.

This bachelor village is full of charm. The communal buildings are in the centre of the interior courtyard, while the monks' houses, most of them single-storied, are built round it, separated from the containing wall by a little yard or garden. To reach these private gardens you have to go through the houses.

Here, one felt, was the perfect expression of the idiorhythmic life. The very simple houses, with whitewashed walls, earth floors and old, rustic furniture covered with dust, made it clear that the monks cared little for the good things of this world. Cracked jugs, riveted jam-pots, a coffee-grinder mended with a piece of wire—everything here was worn out, repaired and a proof of indifference.

In the middle of the afternoon, when the air was filled with the creaking of the cicadas, we visited two householders who had equipped their garden with green-painted iron chairs and a table. They had invited us to coffee and a cigarette. One of them was a former lawyer who had found here, he told us, the peace which was necessary for him if he was to end his life according to his desires. The other, a mason by profession, was hardly

talkative and we did not like to question him as to why he was here.

We learnt less from their failing memories than we did from the village's walls. Looking at the series of frescoes which unfolded its story on the walls of the church and the refectory we could not doubt that the Great Lavra had been rich, beautiful and active. The colours in the churches of Athos are far from the soft-toned greys one finds in the West; here you are enveloped in a harmony of browns and golds, with highlights of brass or polished wood, the whole dimly lit through small windows. The frescoes go right up to the top of the cupolas, uninterrupted illustrations of religious history. The order of the different scenes is constant. The Pantokrator, Christ the Redeemer, is always present in the vault of the central cupola, surrounded with angels and archangels; the Virgin and Child are in the conch of the apse behind the rood-screen. On the walls near the altar are the prophets of the Old Testament. In the lateral apses are scenes from the Old Testament and in the naves the cycle of the twelve great feasts of the Church.

The subjects and the fashion in which they are treated are as traditional as the order in which they are presented. This is not surprising. The emperors and princes who had the monasteries built sent architects and painters who almost always belonged to two schools which flourished between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries; the 'Cretan' and the 'Macedonian' schools. Their methods were as invariable as their subjects. Their style was imposed on them by religious tradition.

Unfortunately many of these paintings were restored at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, when the monasteries recovered some of their wealth. The skill of the restorers, unknown modern painters, was questionable. Lines became slack and colours betrayed bad taste. These restored frescoes have lost their *naïveté* and have become stiff in their drawing, particularly, for example, in the aureoles and the drapery of certain figures. Today, as examples of Byzantine art, they are disappointing.

What interested us was the meaning of these paintings and

their purpose, the subjects represented and the way in which they were represented. It is probable that the aim of all this imagery was simply to instruct; to provide for the monks the minimum of learning on which the rule in the monasteries of Athos did not insist. It was never necessary to have even elementary education in order to enter the monastic life of the peninsula. There was never any school to instruct the men, often illiterate and of very humble origins, who retired to Mount Athos without a thought for remedying their ignorance.

It was to these men that the frescoes were chiefly addressed. Perhaps that explains the simple, schematic interpretation of the texts. In western Europe the sculpture of the Middle Ages was also intended to teach the faithful; the porches with their sculpted scenes serving as open books in days when the catechism was taught on the steps of churches.

The story preserved on those walls gave us food for thought. Georges and I spent several afternoons filming frescoes; important documents, in our opinion, on the religious imagery of Athos. Gilbert amused himself by making copies and drawings.

One evening, when we were sitting near him, resting from our work, our eyes still full of the colours and shapes, sometimes bizarre, of the frescoes, a little old monk came up, leaning on a stick, and looked at Gilbert's work.

'*Kala! Poly kala!*' he exclaimed in admiration. 'That's very good, that drawing. Have you done many of them since you've been here?'

Gilbert opened his portfolio and brought out some drawings he had done at Chilandari, St Panteleimon and elsewhere. The old man was delighted when he could recognize the places.

'There's the harbour at Vatopedi,' he said. 'I know it. I've got a friend there. . . . That's the refectory at Chilandari. . . . Oh look! There's St Athanasios.'

'How did you recognize him?'

'It's easy,' answered the monk. 'He has a moustache, a white beard which divides in two points, and he's rather bald. Of

course I can recognize St Athanasios. Come into the refectory and we'll find him again.'

He led us in and stopped in front of another St Athanasios, complete with his distinguishing features.

'And here?'

'Those are the Ascetic Saints: Moses the Ethiopian, Onuphrecis, Peter the Athonite (he doesn't wear anything but his long beard). Anyone could tell you which was which.'

'Who is this warrior saint?'

'St Dimitrios, of course! With his sword and his spear. Look, surely you recognize St Peter here, with his round face and thick hair?'

'If you went into a church in Salonika, or in Athens, would you still be able to recognize them?'

'Of course. We are accustomed to praying before these holy faces. These pictures encourage us to be like the saints they represent.'

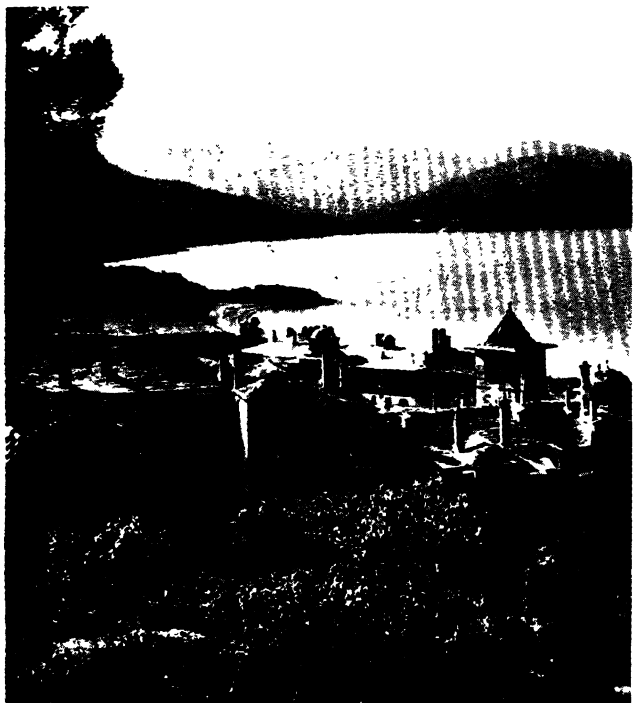
I had noticed to what an extent ikons were an object of pious devotion in Greece, and particularly on Mount Athos. You only had to watch a monk entering a church and approaching the rood-screen to kiss the ikons of the Virgin and of Christ. And once when I saw a monk kneeling before a painting of St Dimitrios it seemed to me that he was not only praying but that he was really in communion with the Saint. He looked as though he were talking with him in perfect intimacy, as though he were on the most familiar terms with him.

Our old guide, quite shrunk from his long life passed so close to the saints, went on interpreting the language of the frescoes for us.

'Look, here is Our Lord mounting the Cross. You see He's climbing up the ladder leaning against the cross by Himself—that's to show that He was crucified by His own will. That way everyone can understand.'

'And what's this ladder with monks going up it escorted by angels, and the devils pulling at the monks' cassocks to make them fall down into the dragon's mouth?'

'That fresco is called "The Ladder of the Spirit", but no one

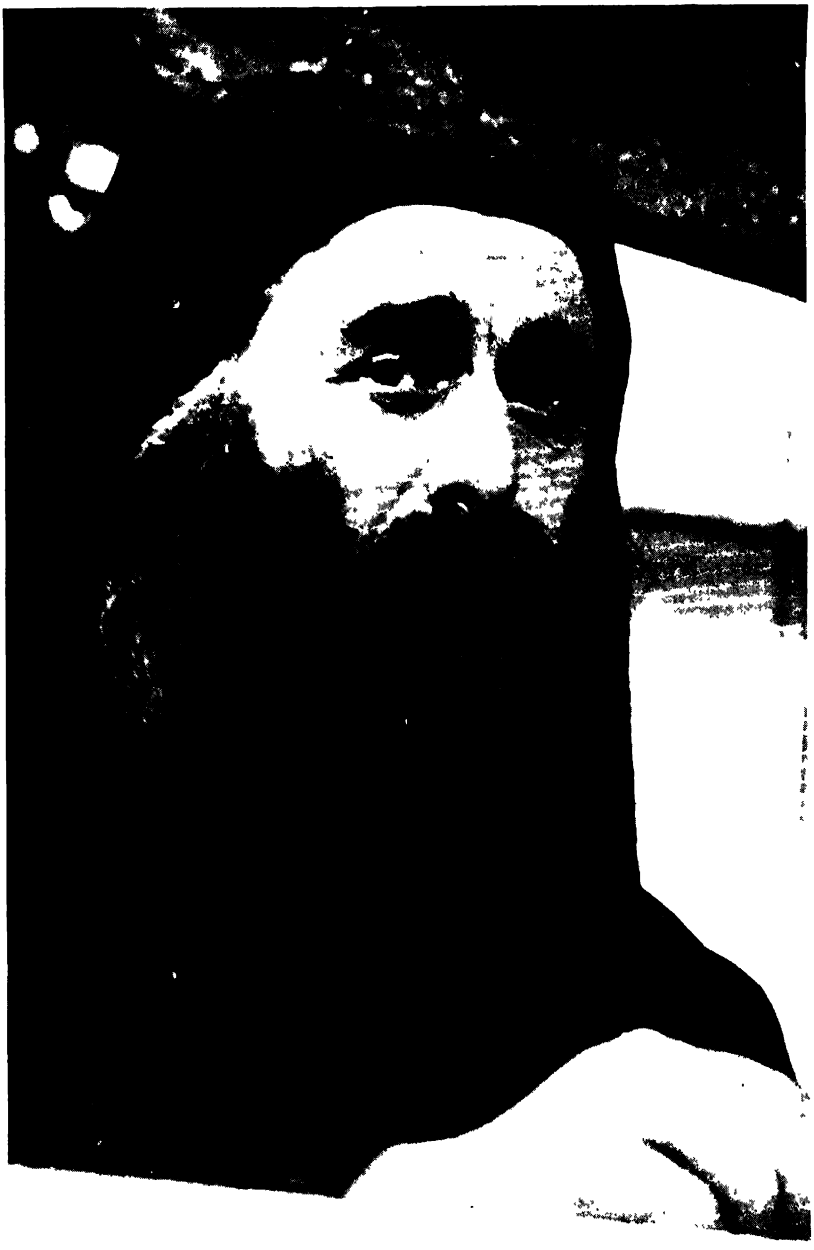


Vatopedi: a general view

The 'Very Great' Lavra, as it is called on old maps

The Great Lavra: details from the fresco of 'The Ladder of the Spirit'

A monk reaching the top of the ladder, and one whose chances seem poor



'ather Isidore of the Great Lavra, who played
his *semantron* with such authority

nowadays knows the whole of its meaning. Those are the steps which men must climb if they have consecrated their life to meditation. The ladder goes up from the monastery to Our Lord —you can see Him there up above. The guardian angels are there to help the monks in their climb, but the demons are always watching for a chance to trip them. Those are the temptations which distract a monk from prayer—the total prayer which will connect him with God.'

'What about this monk with a big purse whom the devil has knocked off the ladder? Is that because he's kept hold of his money?'

'Yes, money is a burden. It's a preoccupation which prevents a monk from lifting up his spirit in prayer.'

'And that one who's only holding on with one hand?'

'He's in danger of falling off. But look at that one who has reached the top. Our Lord is giving him a crown as a reward. He is a holy man.'

We noticed an odd thing. The devils had been scratched and hacked with a knife. In the fresco of the spiritual ladder, for instance, none of them had any heads left.

In the refectories of each monastery the frescoes, untiring, took up the same themes; Hell, the Weighing of Souls, the Great Assemblies and of course the Orthodox Saints. And each time the subjects were treated in exactly the same way. I learnt later that the painters were sternly subjected to very precise rules, so that they would not err in their interpretations. They had at their disposal a little book, the Painter's Guide, in which the composition of each scene was described, with the placing of the figures and the representation of the symbols.

The Orthodox faith, always threatened by theological dissensions and by schism, had to be particularly punctilious on the representation of the dogmatic truths and even today its iconography has remained unchanged, in a style preserved for centuries.

10. Sweet Peace

THE SECRETARY OF THE Great Lavra told us that Father Denis, a former doctor who could speak French well, would very much like to have a talk with us. He lived at the eastern end of the monastery, on the first floor of a building not far from the administrative offices. We went up shabby stairs and along a passage with a sagging ceiling supported by wooden props. Father Denis was a precise and careful man—he might have been an employee in a bank—with lively eyes and a thin face.

He escorted us through a dark little entrance—a sort of landing with dirty, blackened walls on which hung two saucepans. A small stove squatted under a low chimneypiece.

This sketch of a kitchen gave on to another low-ceilinged room, larger but still designed for only one man. One of the walls was nothing but a row of tiny windows looking over the sea. The monastery's meadows sloped gently down from the fortified walls to the shore. A path edged with bushes zigzagged down to the miniature harbour, which opened into the sea through a passage hardly wider than the beam of a caïque. On one side of it were rocks surmounted by a fat square tower, and on the other a thick crenellated wall. We could hear the sound of the waves breaking on the rocks.

Father Denis made us sit down on a large sofa with its back to the windows. The walls were thick with ikons, some in painted wood but most of them reproductions of saints or biblical scenes in faded colours on yellowing paper. The glass

inkpot, the leather writing-pad, the paper basket, the pen tray were all the sort of bric-à-brac familiar to our grandparents.

We started off with small talk. Father Denis was wearing a very well-cut cassock and we admired it.

'It was made in Salonika,' he answered.

He too was visibly trying to be friendly, and talked for a long time about the beauty of the landscape and towns of our native land. Then he asked us abruptly whether we would like to see his album. We were happy to see anything he wanted to show us. He came back from an adjoining room, which must have been his bedroom, with an old album bound in brown linen, such as one only comes across in attics. It was stuffed with postcards, stamped envelopes and letters stuck down at the four corners, in ink grown black. The yellowing paper indicated their age.

Slowly he turned the pages for us, explaining that this was his way of preserving the memory of the strangers who had visited him. Here was a London street full of hansom cabs, and further on a page of pressed flowers. Then a sepia card of the former Palais de Trocadero. We told him that corner of Paris was now much changed and that a new building had gone up there in 1938, the Palais de Chaillot. He widened his eyes and seemed to be interested, but we could feel that our explanations did nothing to efface the vivid picture he had created for himself from his relics.

Each page of the album was covered with writing, surrounding the documents and filling every empty space; writing done with an extra hard nib such as one used at school when learning to write—the nib we could see in the red pen-holder lying in the pen tray.

'What are these long commentaries you write round the postcards?'

The Father seemed pleased that we had asked.

'When I have had a visitor and we have had a long talk together, I write down my impressions, I describe his face and his manner and I make notes on his character. I also give a précis of what we talked about.'

'If it is not an indiscreet question, what do you do with it afterwards?'

'Well, if I happen to think about that visitor, or if he writes to me later—look, like this Frenchman here, who came to see me in 1932 and wrote to me in 1938—then I can remind myself of what we talked about together and what he looked like. I shall do it about you, whom I like very much. . . . But nowadays I don't get letters from many of my visitors, and the ones who do write are all Greek.'

A bunch of very dead memories. . . . I could guess what had happened to the people who had come, like us, to pass a few hours in this little room. They had at once been charmed by this perfect retreat, so calm, with its great view over the Aegean Sea, and they had enjoyed their meeting with this rather unusual man who continued to travel about the world in his thoughts. But they soon forgot. . . . They had not gone on writing. . . .

Before we, in our turn, went away, we began to feel the emptiness round Father Denis, his inactivity and his ineffectiveness. He seemed to be an intelligent man. How could he be content, year after year, with classifying postcards and memories? Was this one of the accepted pastimes of monastic life? What, we asked him, had he done before he came to Athos?

'I was a doctor in a small town in Greek Macedonia. I was married, and I lost my wife. My children went away, and anyhow the country was occupied by the Turks. I was all alone and I gave up my job. It was faith that brought me into the sanctuary of Orthodox life.'

That was all we could find out. Our host, not used to talking, felt that he had told us the whole story, and when he offered us a *raki* it was in order to bring the conversation to an end.

When we left Father Denis it was four o'clock in the afternoon. The *semantron* player came out of his house and crossed the court as he did every day at four in the morning and four in the afternoon in order to call the monks to prayer. He lived in the church square, on the first floor of a well-kept house. In order to fulfil his function with dignity, Father Isidore wore a

full, black, pleated cloak. He carried his *semantron*, a wooden board about two yards long; an ordinary board of cypress wood, narrow enough in the middle to be grasped in the left hand. With his other hand he struck the board with a wooden hammer. First, three quick taps in the same place, then a fourth, nearer his hand, which was more sonorous. The rhythm might vary. You could hear the call of the *semantron* from a long way off, sometimes from several miles. It was a custom preserved by the monks from the days of the Turkish occupation, when they had been forbidden the use of bells.

When we first heard a *semantron* played, at Chilandari, we were much impressed. Our ear had developed since then, and we now knew that there are several ways of playing the *semantron*, as there are of playing the drums or the cymbals.

Father Isidore, who was a fine man, carried out his job with dignity and played like no one else on Athos. If he awoke us at night, it was with an elegant and rapid, yet expressive rhythm. And he announced the end of his piece in a way unknown to the other *semantron* players of Athos: the rhythm would grow faster and faster, the tone would amplify, and it would end with three smartly struck taps.

Father Isidore was an artist, and we told him so, which embarrassed him greatly. But on each of his outings he indulged in a little weakness and how long had it been going on? He would come out of his house and cross the court, playing on his *semantron*. Then he would stop, lean the instrument against a wall, knock on a door and disappear. He was taking coffee with a friend. Soon afterwards he would come out, march across another bit of the square and visit another friend for another coffee. Then his round would end.

One by one the monks would start to emerge and make their way slowly towards the church. Father Isidore would then go into the heavy porch of the refectory opposite the church, where there was another, and much bigger, *semantron*. It was a big plank, three yards long, hung on chains from a beam in the porch. When he struck it, still in the same rhythm, it gave out a deep, grave sound. Then it was the moment for the office to begin,

and Father Isidore would attack yet a third *semantron*, smaller and made of brass, with a tone reminiscent of Chinese gongs.

But this solemn call was not answered by an equally solemn ceremony. A dozen hobbling old men would cross the court and enter the church. Dozing, they would listen to the afternoon office as they had done for perhaps half a century. Others would have stayed at home, busy about who knows what little tasks.

In the Great Lavra, once the first and most flourishing of all the monasteries on the peninsula, there were now only about thirty monks.

We were looking for men who might have preserved a particular form of wisdom, in order to try to understand the inner meaning of their choice. Perhaps we had been wrong to come in a western frame of mind, questioning with our intellects. We sought men who thought out their religion and all we found was men living their religion. Were they the wiser for that? Was our disappointment due to a failure to grasp a form of wisdom, or was it that we had found only the remains of a past epoch?

We had all been deeply impressed by the wonderful setting offered by the monasteries, but when we considered the lives of these men, isolated from each other before the great emptiness of the Athos community, we felt nothing but sadness and the sense of a world of limited thought. We wondered what influence Mount Athos could still have on the Orthodox world. It certainly still exerted a strong influence on Greece, but was it possible for any community to continue standing aside from progress and from all new ideas?

Greek friends whose opinion we had asked had admitted that the life of the monks on Athos was not always edifying. Some of them claimed that the monasteries could never possibly regain their prosperity and that it would be better—as certain businessmen had suggested—to build a road to Mount Athos and turn it into a tourist resort. But I suspect that the Greek mind is too profoundly religious for such a transformation to be undertaken. One finds a deep respect for the Holy Mountain

among the people; besides which, nearly every peasant or workman has, or had, a friend, a cousin or a brother on Mount Athos.

And more than that; having stayed there it was impossible not to feel the particular atmosphere of this predestined land, consecrated to religious life for so many centuries. It was not just because a strict law forbade the entrance of 'all women, all female animals, eunuchs or beardless boys'. Nor did the attraction come only from the beauty of the great fortresses with their multitude of coloured balconies, surrounded by their silent woods and springs of cool water. If men had come to pray in this place, when there are so many equally beautiful places on the shores of the Aegean—why not, for instance, on one of the sister peninsulas, Longos or Kassandra?—was it not because here one breathed a special air, compounded of wisdom and piety?

PART TWO

11. Rounding the Cape

BEFORE UNDERTAKING THE CLIMB over the spur of Mount Athos to reach the *sketes* of Kapsokalyvia, St Anne and the New Skete, on the other side, we were anxious to rest and enjoy a simplicity-cure among the good, calm monks of the Great Lavra. All the same, we jumped for joy when the Secretary woke us up from a siesta:

'The police have told me that a small boat has arrived in the harbour, and they'll be glad to take you.'

'Where are they going?'

'To St Anne, I expect. They've come from Iviron and are going round the peninsula. They'll be leaving at once.'

It was a race against time. It is no light matter to pack 120 pounds of baggage in a few minutes, and it was important to forget nothing. We thanked the Secretary, who was surprised at our intention of coming back in a few weeks, and we rushed down the hill.

A caïque loaded with water melons was tied up on the blue, transparent waters of the little harbour. Two men in caps and grey jackets were waiting for us. The older, Georgios the owner, was only thirty-five. His bony face was slashed with the eternal black moustache of the lay Greek. For once, the bargaining was quick. He agreed to put us and our baggage off at St Anne, on the south coast, for the excessive sum of about £2. Although it was too much, it was wonderful to escape the hard

journey across Mount Athos at a height of seven or eight hundred metres, and not to have to carry our back-breaking packs.

While the skipper was cranking the engine I had a quick look in the hold. It was an old heavy-oil engine with which no mechanic would want anything to do. The gear-case only held together thanks to the many pieces of wire with which it was trussed, like a joint for roasting. The rivets were worn and a blow-lamp acted as sprayer. It emitted various mooing sounds and a few rings of blue smoke.

As soon as the skipper put her into gear the deck began to vibrate so violently that the heap of water melons rolled from side to side.

Before heading out to sea the caïque circled the basin under the dreamy gaze of one old monk and two bored policemen. We sat down, our heads comfortably shaded by our big straw hats, and prepared to contemplate Mount Athos from a hundred yards out to sea, standing back, so to speak, to get a painter's view.

The heat was stunning because of the refraction from the dark blue, almost violet, water. There was the monastery of Prodromou, and there was the tip of the peninsula with its small lighthouse. All boats heading for Istanbul and the Black Sea stood well out from this dangerous promontory. Once, on a stormy day, we had seen a small black cargo boat lying low in the water, struggling desperately to round the cape. That and the aeroplane at Esphigmenou were the only signs of 'civilization' we had encountered during our stay.

Once we had rounded the point our caïque felt the big waves coming in from the open sea, and the motor began to labour. The slopes of the mountain rose straight up above the water, the lower buttresses hiding the summit. Right at the top of a high cliff we could see a tiny house, clinging there five hundred feet up. It seemed to be inaccessible, at least from the shore side.

Our boat ploughed on, slow, noisy and rolling in the heavy swell. It rose and fell on the waves which flooded up the rocks

without breaking and then made a counter-swell out to sea again. Gilbert, who was sea-sick, lay lifeless among the melons, his hat over his face.

We had to shout to make ourselves heard above the noise of the engine. Georgios, who was at the tiller, explained at the top of his voice why he was carrying melons.

'I live at Karka, further north, but one day I had a free meal at Vatopedi and I could see that the monks had trouble getting food. So you see, that's why I decided to load up the boat with melons and sell them here.'

'Did you grow them yourself?'

'I did not! I bought them for nearly nothing, and I shall do very nicely with them. And what about you—how long have you been here?'

'Over two months.'

'Have the monks treated you well?'

'Very well, so long as one doesn't stay too long at any one monastery.'

'You're just walking?'

'No, we're making a film.'

'Does a film bring in much money?'

'Well, you've got to make it first, and that takes time.'

'Do you know the south side? Are there many monasteries there?'

'There's St Paul, Dionysiou, St Panteleimon . . . eight, anyway, and the *sketes* as well.'

'What are they?'

'Villages of monks. Where are you going?'

'We don't know. We'll stop at sunset.'

'Will you go to St Anne?'

'We'll go wherever we can sell melons. When the boat's empty we'll head for home.'

A little bay appeared, carved in a wall of rock which was topped by a green slope where a *skete* nestled in an oasis of fruit trees. The rocks had deep caves bored in them by the sea, which the water filled with dull growling noises. There seemed to be no means of landing and Georgios, who had slowed the engine,

circled the boat in the bay while he yelled through his joined hands: '*Karpousia! Karpousia!*' ('Melons! Melons!')

He shouted up towards the houses and his words echoed among the rocks. He repeated them several times. He was heard, because a black shape appeared on a balcony. First one man leant out, then another. A third came out along a terrace—a young man, judging by his springy stride. He began to come down towards the left side of the bay. Following him, Georgios rounded another little point of rock which had hidden a second inlet from us. There we were pleased to see a little jetty. A slipway about two yards wide led gently up to a stone shelter just large enough for one boat. It was a miniature harbour, not even sheltered from the waves of the open sea, which rushed into it in their full force. It must have been absolutely unusable in winter.

We had the feeling that we were landing at the end of the world. The young monk placidly watched our manœuvres, a sack lying beside him. Georgios did not seem very happy about the dis-embarkation, fearing, with every reason, for his boat; the waves were rising and falling against the side of the jetty and it was far from easy to unload. Meanwhile two more monks arrived, coming down steps cut into the rock. Gilbert got ashore with difficulty and lay down on the ground to calm his stomach, while the deckhand threw us melons and Georgios bargained with the monks. He weighed the fruit in a Roman balance which he held at arm's length. Each monk, once he had made his purchase, went off with three or four fat melons in his sack.

We left Georgios and his companion, who intended to spend the night on board, sheltered by some promontory, and we too took the goat-path up to the *skete*. After a few twists and turns we passed the first inlet, where Georgios had called the monks, and we again saw the cottages and their orchards, in the shade now because the sun had moved round and was only lighting up the other slope of the valley. The fresh green place smelt like a wood after rain.

At a turn of the path we came to a house on a terrace covered

with a trellis. A young monk was dozing in a deckchair by the door; he looked about sixteen, with the beginnings of a beard and the nonchalance of a young god. The sound of our footsteps woke him and he fled into the house, slamming the door in our faces. We were disturbing the peace, but we knocked on the door. Another monk, this one about thirty years old, came to open it. He had a very soft voice and a pleasant face.

Inside, the house was like a beach-hut on the Côte d'Azur: whitewashed walls, hardly any furniture, a table. A door and a window opened on to the terrace. The boy came back with three glasses of *raki* on a tray. His hair fell in long locks from under his bonnet, framing his still childish face. He served us, then went to sit on a chair with his hands on his knees, like a very good little girl.

After the *raki* we quenched our thirst with long draughts of lemon juice.

Our rudimentary Greek prevented us from carrying on much of a conversation. We learnt only that we were at Kapsokalyvia and that the Pilgrims' House was higher up, near the church whose belfry we could see. Before we left the monks asked us for our visiting cards.

To get to the Pilgrims' House, we followed paths strangled between terraces and little walled gardens, the doors all equipped with bells. A monk at work in front of his house hailed us as we passed. Unlike the monasteries, which we had often found badly kept-up and too large for their occupants, this community gave the impression of being built on the right scale, like an active village. The newly-painted houses, the pruned trellises, the well-kept orchards, all spoke of neatness and comfort.

A little higher we passed some road-works, abandoned for the evening. One of the walls supporting the path was being repaired. It was a real masterpiece of patience, the stones fitting in with each other perfectly, although they were not cut.

We found the pilgrims' inn hidden behind the church, and were welcomed there by Father Theodore, a chubby, pot-bellied monk who looked like some jovial Benedictine of the

Renaissance. He offered us *raki*, the second round of the evening, which quite restored us to ourselves.

From the balcony of our room there was a view of the *skete*. We overlooked the grey slate dome of a house, and Father Theodore's garden, which was laid out on three terraces. Our host had hurried down to see to our dinner, and we could watch his bowed back as he busily picked beans.

We were particularly touched by our reception in this place. We felt as though we were visiting a farm belonging to relations, anxious to put themselves out for us. The emptiness of the monasteries had given way to a kind of family life with which the house resounded. Father Theodore cooked the evening meal. Below, in the yard, two other monks were mending a grindstone, while the Benjamin of the family had just been to open the irrigation channels, now that the sun was too low to bake the soil. From the cistern, which had filled up during the hot time of the day, little threads of water now ran among the bean rows, the potatoes and the great melons hidden under their leaves. From where we leant on the balcony we could hear the cool murmur of the water as it flowed from terrace to terrace. The little channels distributed it so methodically that every corner of the garden was watered. The delicious smell of wet earth was wafted up to us.

Kapsokalyvia, our first *skete*, was not unlike a Flemish convent, and I felt that here, even more than in the monasteries, the idiorhythmic life peculiar to Athos found its full expression. The typical retired, celibate household of the Grand Lavra, one of many and surrounded by a wall, had already expressed the individualism of these monks, but the restrictions of life in a monastery—however ill-defined the duties of an Athonite monk—still made themselves felt. In the *skete*, on the other hand, there was no wall to emphasize the promiscuity of communal life and each man was free to take up what he liked best. The monk's freedom and independence became part of a coherent and constructive system which helped to give the inhabitants of the *skete* a sense of belonging to a municipality—or rather, to a parish.

12. *We visit Gregory*

WHEN WE ARRIVED THAT evening Kapsokalyvia was resting after its day's work. Next morning, however, it was alive again, with monks coming and going in the streets. The cobbler's shop was open. At the roadworks there were bearded young monks pushing wheelbarrows up slopes, heaping stones into piles with a great clatter. An old mason-monk, whose cassock hung down below his grey overall—and who was evidently the foreman—was fitting the stones together like a cabinet maker doing inlay work. Further on five monks were building a chapel. They fetched the stone from a quarry behind their house, carrying it on their backs in slings supported by a band round the head, like Red Indians. There were some lay-workers with them, raising the walls by piling up uncut stones barely held together by a cement which was far too liquid. The walls were a yard thick, which hardly seemed appropriate for a chapel only a few yards square. They could be sure, however, that it would be some time before it collapsed.

Every now and then, as we explored the *skete*, we would knock on a door.

'Kalimera.'

'Kalimera.'

The monk would bow, with one hand on his breast.

One of our hosts was making rosaries with brass wire and shells. He worked with great speed and neatness.

'It brings in a bit of money,' he explained. 'Merchants from Saloṇika and Athens buy a lot of our work.'

'What do you charge for them?'

'One and sixpence each.'

'May we buy three?'

'I would prefer to give them to you.'

Right at the top of the *skete*, a little apart on the hillside, lived Gregory, the friend of the Rumanian monk we had met in Karyer. Twice we climbed up to see him and found him out, but after the third scramble a voice answered us: 'Come upstairs.'

On the first floor there was a chapel, the central feature of the building, and a sitting-room, light, clean and attractive in spite of the poverty of its furnishings. Father Gregory bustled about to greet us and do honour to his friend, but apologized because he would have to leave in an hour or so. Without letting us know, he went down to his work-room and made us some American chocolate which we greatly enjoyed. No doubt he guessed that we would be hungry.

He spoke excellent English and was gay, lively and active.

'A long time ago I used to live in the United States,' he told us. 'I can still remember Georges Carpentier's fight in New York.'

'Have you been here for long?'

'It will soon be twenty years, but I lead an active life. I'm not just a gardener, I'm a postman. I deliver the post for the whole of Athos. It's a hard life, but I'm very fond of it. In the winter, though, when it snows, the walking can be quite painful.'

'But why do you do it?'

'It's my way of life. I pray as I walk, and anyway, I'm still young enough to do something useful. And it's good for the soul to mortify the body.'

'You don't really deliver the post over all the peninsula?'

'Indeed I do—I sometimes have to walk for fifteen to eighteen hours at a time. And I walk barefoot because that's more uncomfortable. You know what our mountain paths are

like in the heat! But to tell the truth, it would be hard for me, now, to stay here in this house alone. Our family is scattered now that our Father is dead.'

'Used there to be several monks here?'

'Seven years ago there were still five of us.'

'And was the Father who died a sort of abbot, or master of the house?' asked Georges who, like Gilbert and me, was much charmed by our host's gentleness and strength of spirit.

'Yes, that's right,' he answered. 'But you are talking about our particular house. I ought to explain that all the *kelli* are chapels, first and foremost. We all live in spiritual families, in chapels dedicated to patron saints. Come and see ours.'

It was a replica in miniature of the churches in the big monasteries—just as dark, and surmounted by a cupola. A small rood-screen shielded the altar with its wooden shutters and there were four stalls on either side.

'It's dedicated to St Paul,' he went on. 'We pray here during the day, and at night as well. The rest of the house is just used for living in, because after all,' he said with a smile, 'one has to eat and sleep.'

'But now you are all alone here?'

'Yes.'

'Does the house belong to you?'

'Yes, provisionally. The house belongs to the Father, the family's head and guide whose children we are—spiritually, of course. But the Father must have enough money for the upkeep of his household.'

'And can anyone come and join the family?'

'Yes, but the Father can't keep more than five or six—even that is a great expense.'

'When he dies, does he bequeath his money and his house to someone?'

'Yes, he chooses the one he thinks most worthy to succeed him and take his place at the head of the family. The part a Father plays in a household is very important. We come to him because he is better than we are. Being with him teaches us to pray better and to live a better life.'

'He's a director of consciences, in fact?'

'Yes, and a master, because his children must obey him, and an adviser, because part of his task is to direct each person's efforts. Prayer is something extremely important in a *kelli*, and all the work a Father allots to his children—the housework and cooking and gardening—is considered as exercise preparing the spirit for prayer.'

'Does everyone in the *skete* live like that, in families?'

'They are supposed to, but the number of families has dwindled a lot and you often see houses standing empty, like ours. There are still some which are very active—the painters' families, for example. When you go to St Anne I advise you to visit Father Daniel's house, which is right at the top, on the plateau, outside the *skete*. You'll be very interested by the life they lead there.'

'Do monks join in these small groups round spiritual leaders because they've been unable to find a kind of life to suit them in the monasteries?'

'Perhaps, but also because we are all free to choose a guide we like and who understands us. And it's very difficult, you know, to live quite alone and make progress without any moral support or direction. The Father provides this support.'

'If you are free in your choice of family and leader, can you leave it equally freely?'

'You can, but it hardly ever happens. You would have to be capable of continuing on your way alone and that isn't given to many people. It's a very good thing to learn obedience, and it's something we all need to learn when we come here.'

Thus, in a few simple words, Father Gregory imparted a little of his vast experience. We could feel that he was all humility, though he seemed to us, possibly, one of those capable of going his own way alone, or perhaps even of directing others. He gave the impression of being a man truly free and master of himself. Judging by his description of life in the *skete*, it appeared that each man led the life best suited to him, strong in his freedom and his sense of belonging to the small community which helped and sustained him. After our disappointment in the

monasteries we began at last to feel that we were coming rather nearer to a living truth. We were in the presence of a man who had succeeded in giving his life an inner meaning.

Just as we were about to leave he stopped us for a moment, while he hunted out three tins of condensed milk to give us: 'There—you are strangers here, with no families or friends, so I'll give you this present.'

We were all very touched and Georges assured him, in his best English, that we now felt we had a friend in Kapsokalyvia. Gregory also gave us three prints of St Paul, his patron saint, similar to those which decorated his house.

At dinner that evening on the terrace of the Pilgrims' House, in a romantic moonlight (except for the mosquitoes), we still felt excited by what we had learnt that afternoon. Here in the *skete* we had felt for the first time something of the inner equilibrium of the monks of Athos. The tranquil life they led, in its primitive simplicity, freed their spirits and gave them every opportunity for thinking and praying. It seemed to me that these Orthodox monks had quite naturally rediscovered, or had instinctively perpetuated, this form of monastic life, because no other was so well suited to their temperaments. Had it not been in just this way that, in the fourth century, the first coenobites had lived, on the island of Tabenne, grouped round St Pancome? Soon afterwards the rule was fixed by St Basil, the Bishop of Niceus, to be transmitted down to the present through the great coenobites of the east, of whom Father Athanasios, founder of the Great Lavra, was one.

There was something persuasive about this mixture of the pastoral with the contemplative life. Shepherds have always been supposed to find God more easily than others, and I would have liked to think that it was the same for these gardeners of the Church. They had, after all, come a long way to live according to their faith. I was not sure that we ourselves were not influenced by our surroundings.

The idiorhythmic life is individualism made monk, as against the coenobitic life, which shapes the individual to the collective discipline. In most religious congregations the

novices, or adepts, submit to a precise discipline for the suppression of the will, while here the organization tended to develop the will-power and the power of choice. The monks were the sole directors and judges of their own religious exercises; they gathered together in the church only for rare and important feasts. Their progress, therefore, was made through their own will-power, and through experience. Their efforts towards union with God were, of course, controlled by their spiritual fathers, which is why they lived in little groups; but even here, the groups were formed independently and spontaneously, and each little community had its own character. They were not unlike the *ashrams* of the Hindu religion, in which men seeking spiritual evolution gather round a *guru.*

Georges was particularly interested in the relationship between master and disciple. It seemed that the personality of some of the guides, their authority in their *skete* and reputation throughout the peninsula attracted many novices. If the Father, or the *guru,* was going to be able to transmit the divine vision to his disciples, he would need to have exceptional qualities. Only thus could he exercise the persuasive force on which the system rested. On the one hand there was the influence exercised by a superior man on emulous young ones and his responsibility with regard to the spiritual development of his pupils; on the other hand, the disciples' complete confidence in and obedience to their master.

As the groups formed freely and spontaneously, personal esteem and affection must have played a part in holding them together. There must sometimes have been a danger that these men's emotions would deviate. The disciple, unless his character were strong, must have risked focusing on his spiritual father the love which had driven him in search of God. It would be possible for him, as a result of a shared daily life, to come to see his leader only as a man, to the detriment of his spiritual progress. If his evolution were to continue, the novice must really be able to keep intact his need to commune with God thanks to his director's teaching. From what we had seen, Mount Athos did not escape the danger which threatens all

masculine communities—but on a subject so delicate as homosexuality one must beware of judging by appearances.

That evening in Kapsokalyvia we were very far from our own urban existence, and oddly enough we each realized, on self-examination, that we felt nearer to understanding spiritual problems; suggesting that since we had been here some change had come about in us. Staying on Athos, without material preoccupations, on the margin of the world, had disturbed our habits of thought. Some of the men with whom we had been living vegetated in a gentle little round of peasant life; but others made the best use of the particular conditions provided by the *skete* in order to strive to attain the spiritual joys of contemplation. And now we ourselves were beginning to get a glimpse of the lesson of Athos.

It was late; the moon was about to disappear behind the mountain; the slate roof of a cupola still caught its light and the sea was scintillating. The silence was broken by only one noise. Down below, in the bay, two pirate boats were trawling close to the cliff. In Greece it is forbidden to fish too close inland, but who was going to catch them here?

Our thoughtful silence was interrupted by the heavy tread of our hosteller. He had the delighted look of a child who has prepared a surprise. He had come to show us an engraved wooden ikon like those we had seen at Karyes, but bigger, about the size of a quarto sheet of paper. It was finely worked.

'How long did it take you, Father Theodore?'

'A year,' answered the Father, pleased with our congratulations, as he took back his treasure. 'Will you need breakfast tomorrow?'

'Yes, at daybreak, because we must go back to St Panteleimon. Do you think there will be a boat to take us?'

'I very much doubt it. Boats never come to Kapsokalyvia. Why don't you go on to St Anne; you'd have a better chance there.'

13. Work Begins

BEFORE HE LET US go Father Theodore wanted our opinion on the wall they were repairing near the church, which supported the path and which was always collapsing. Having examined it, we came to the conclusion that the damage was done by the subterranean channelling of a stream which they had harnessed a little higher up; to prevent further subsidence we advised the Father to strengthen the stream's canalization for another twenty yards or so, and to build his wall rather thicker. He seemed pleased with our advice, and led us beyond the church to put us on our mountain road, round the flank of Athos.

'Take care not to get lost. You must follow this zig-zag path,' he said, pointing straight up into the sky, 'and you'll find it a hard stony climb, but when you get to the top you'll see a grassy plateau. There's a house there. Skirt the plateau, with the buttresses of Mount Athos on your right, and when you come to the spur which sticks out above the sea you'll see a cross and the path divides into two. The left-hand fork goes to Karoulia and the right-hand fork to St Anne. You can't go wrong. And when you get to the cross, remember that something very wonderful happened there.'

'A miracle?'

'No, not exactly. But it was there that the greatest singer in all Russia was rediscovered—a world-wide celebrity. He had decided one day to leave the Moscow Opera and hide himself far from the world. He came to Mount Athos without anyone

knowing. While people were hunting for him all over the world, he was living in the Great Lavra; he never sang and no one knew who he was. But one day he took his sheep out up by the big cross, and he was singing to call them. A monk heard him and was so surprised by the beauty of his voice that he asked him who he really was, and he admitted his identity. That's how the world learnt that the famous tenor was in our midst. They begged him to go back to Russia, but he never would—he died in the Great Lavra in the greatest poverty. . . .'

Father Theodore was silent for a moment, then said: 'Well, good-bye, and good luck on your climb.'

We laboured up that vertical slope for two hours, and as it was impossible to see the end of the zig-zags, we might well have been going to climb for ever. At last we reached the plateau and the little house mentioned by Father Theodore. In it lived two ancient Russians in ragged, stinking cassocks. Their house, too, was decaying: the walls were crumbling, the balconies sagged, the chapel was subsiding. The surroundings were very peaceful. The grassy plateau sloped gently and overlooked a very pale blue, foam-flecked sea, two thousand two hundred feet below. A storm had got up—a strange storm without a cloud.

We made our way slowly to the upper edge of the woods. The trees along the slope of Athos had been torn up by falls of snow and rock, and their skeletons stuck up out of the wreckage.

We were able to quench our incessant thirst at a lovely spring shaded by enormous chestnut trees, and there we ate a tin of sardines. Two big grey bullocks grazed quietly nearby, and one came up to the spring to drink. He too was thirsty; not content to drink the water from the stone basin, he put his muzzle to the spout from which the water must have jetted at a rate of about two pints a second; and there, to our great astonishment, he stood for more than a minute, his neck stretched out, gulping down the flow without allowing a drop to escape.

It was only ten o'clock and we were already feeling worn out

by our walk, less because of the climb than because of our inadequate diet since our arrival on Athos, which was taking its toll. Every day our resistance became weaker—and our rucksacks heavier.

Sure enough, the path forked when we reached the cross. Before taking the right-hand path, as instructed by Father Theodore, we decided to have a look at the cliff of the hermits. At first the path to Karoulia descended gently, then it lost itself in rocks with a sheer drop down to the sea. 'It must have been the wrong path,' we thought, unaware that it was the only one and that a few days later we would be following it further when we went to visit the hermits.

Meanwhile we had to try our luck for a boat from St Anne. It was time for us to start work on our film and we had to return to St Panteleimon to collect our gear. So we set about scrambling down from the plateau, jumping from rock to rock in the dry bed of a stream, taking short cuts when we could, clutching the bottoms of our rucksacks with both hands to prevent them jolting too much at each leap. Not a tree, not a shadow since the plateau, and we were walking in the full heat of the midday sun. The first conifers appeared lower down, then a reservoir of water apparently regulated by the monks, then at last a little hut surrounded by trees. In spite of our hurried descent we were still at an altitude of sixteen hundred feet; the houses of the *skete*, which we soon came to, went down in terraces to sea level.

St Anne was a good deal bigger than Kapsokalyvia, and consisted of about fifty houses, or rather chapels. Our path followed one side of the valley and opposite, on the other side, a number of houses were grouped round the principal church, with their terraces and trees, but with no sign of any human being. It was siesta-time, and only foreigners like us would be out in the overwhelming heat while the whole landscape invited one to rest.

On the terraces between the gardens the air lay still and heavy. Our trousers, dripping wet, clung to our legs and our shirts were stained with the dye from the leather straps of our

rucksacks. We felt as though we were in a hot-house. It had been a record: we had only taken half an hour to come down to sea level; we arrived at the harbour quite exhausted.

It was a little cove, with a pebble beach and a wooden jetty. Cicadas were creaking on every side. A small boat, a red boat—our boat—lay on the calm and luminous water. Not a sound. Three men lay asleep face downwards in the shade of two big plane trees. The impression of total immobility, of nature and man at rest, was so strong that it compelled us to drop our packs, stretch out beside the sailors, and sleep like them in the heavy noontide heat. Their first words woke us; we slept lightly, as travellers do, for fear that someone might steal our gear.

The skipper agreed to take us on board for the reasonable sum of about two shillings a head. He would have liked to have asked more, no doubt, but as he ran the official boat service for the south coast, he had to stick to the tariff. A monk came on board with us. He was going back to the New Skete after buying timber and tiles for the house he was building. It was hard to imagine what kind of a hovel he was going to construct; his planks were rotten and bristling with nails, his tiles broken.

We lay on the deck, sheltered from the sun by a tarpaulin. The sea was absolutely smooth, the engine chugged steadily and we were gently fanned by the boat's movement. It was hot. From time to time a buzzing fly would stray under the tarpaulin.

St Anne disappeared, and the watch tower of the New Skete, another collection of several dozen houses, loomed up. After the greenery of the *sketes* the coast became arid and steep, with only one or two trees clinging to the rocks and all the colour baked out by the sun. St Paul stood on the flank of the mountain, beside a great cone of debris deposited by a torrent. The gate of the boat-house was painted with aluminium paint and looked dazzling.

Georges and I were going to St Panteleimon to get our filming equipment, while Gilbert was to get off at Daphne to do our shopping and pick up our mail. We had only received one

lot of letters since our arrival, when we were at Karyes. There was not, in fact, any regular postal service at the monasteries.

When the monastery of Dionysiou came in sight we goggled. A friend had advised us to visit it because, though neither one of the biggest nor one of the most important of the monasteries, it was, like Chilandari, particularly attractive in its architecture and its monks had the reputation of being very hospitable to strangers, which was not unimportant. We decided that we must indeed visit it on our way back from St Panteleimon. The monasteries on the north coast are squat and spreading, while on the south coast, which is much steeper, they are perched on rocky promontories above sheer drops into the sea. With their little wooden balconies high up on their walls, Dionysiou and Simopetra are reminiscent of the great buildings of Lhassa, in Tibet.

Simopetra, clinging to the mountainside, is even more impressive than Dionysiou. It has become famous through being photographed and appearing on posters, with its magnificent great walls rising vertically three hundred feet above the sea. We recognized it at once, but its situation was even more astonishing and imposing than we had imagined.

There was an hour's stop at Daphne. We rushed to the post office—and our mail was not there. We were enraged with the Greek postal system—always pretty haphazard. We telephoned Karyes—no post; then Erissos, the frontier village, where we learned that the postmaster had kept our letters because he could not remember whether he was to forward them to Karyes or to Daphne. He was told to despatch them by that evening's boat. Our anger subsided and we were happy again.

Daphne is the official port because it is the only place on Athos which is in regular touch with the outside world, that is to say, with Salonika. It is at Daphne that the Holy Community's guards are on duty and prevent any infringement of the law against women by prodding the chests of all who arrive. From there the visitor goes by mule-back to the monastery of Xeropotamou, which is a few hours from Karyes. In a fit of

conscience a policeman asked to see our *diamonitirions*, but he gave them back at once with a wink: we were known, by this time. Everybody was aware of our plan to make a film of life on Athos. This feeling of being expected—even announced—in a place where communications were so bad, was rather surprising, but it was like all country places; news travelled faster than we did and everyone knew everything.

A single street served the houses of Daphne and the inn which was also the tobacconist, the bank, the exchange and the grocery. There were a number of people in the arbour where we ate a meal worthy of the name; nearly all the tables were occupied, either by monks or by laymen in uniformly grey and patched clothes. The proprietor, whose standard of service was high, addressed us, his only foreign guests, in English:

'Will you taste a mutton chop?'

We felt we belonged when we recognized an old acquaintance; the monk of the Vatopedi road who had sung as he rode side-saddle. This time he smiled at us without embarrassment.

The boat for Erissos was just about to leave, so Georges and I hurried to join the twenty-eight passengers already on board (fifteen was supposed to be the maximum number). We were to rejoin Gilbert the next day on our return from St Panteleimon.

Nothing had changed at the Russian monastery since we were last there; the old monk who had received us on our disembarkation still dragged his heavy leather boots along the tiled corridors. Hoping for a tip, he pointed out how well our gear had been looked after.

Without losing time we began to take pictures of the monastery, its onion-domed churches and a few typical faces from among the old monks. It was our first contact with the 35 mm camera, and it did not take me long to discover that this so-called portable camera was extremely heavy; it weighed fifteen pounds and the batteries, which I carried strapped to my waist, nine pounds. That day was no more than a trial canter, but it satisfied us. All went well.

There was only one worry: the batteries, which had been standing idle so long, were almost flat and we would have to charge them that evening. We had to bring out the charger and take advantage of our free time in order to let it run for a few hours. We reckoned that it would have to run for ten hours in order to recharge absolutely flat batteries.

After supper we said good-bye to the Secretary at St Panteleimon and went down to the sea, some way from the monastery, in order to get our motor going. We put it down on some stones and tried to start it. The petrol tank was full and we had a can in reserve. The generator had to be started in the same way as an outboard motor: you gave a sharp pull on a cord rolled round a block. We rolled the cord ten, fifteen times, and still nothing happened, though two or three pops and a smoke ring or two proved that our generator was still alive. On our hands and knees we checked every one of its organs. This was a good beginning! We should never have laughed at the decrepit engine of Georgios' boat.

Tired of pulling the cord, we decided that since the sparking plugs were all right we would pair the starter of the motor with the terminal leads. One, two . . . and three: I pulled the cord and the motor came with it. Georges got an electric shock in his hands and yelled, shaking his fingers: but the motor was going. It sounded like a mosquito in flight. It gave off a little white smoke and, as though to make its activity even more obvious, it began to move slowly across the stones, shifted by its own vibrations and the movement of the piston. It waddled like a mechanical toy displayed by a hawker, looking very comic. We wedged it with big stones, clipped on the leads, and its rhythm slowed down; it laboured, but it continued to work.

Satisfied, we made ourselves comfortable on the rocks, in the breeze, where we couldn't hear the motor too much. We smoked our pipes in silence, waiting for the batteries to be fully charged. Night had fallen, and we were happy.

Our spell of activity was about to begin. After the passive days in which we had simply wanted to stare in order to understand, we were now going to pass on to making something.

14. Father Eugene's Sin

GEORGES AND I LEFT St Panteleimon on the regular boat, to pick up Gilbert at Daphne and go on to St Anne. We had decided to stop there for a little in order to rest before getting to work on the film.

When we left France we had been armed with a certain amount of academic knowledge about the monks' republic, but no understanding of its real character. We had only an approximate idea of the décor—probably unique in Europe—the peace of mind and spirit which reigns there and the spiritual effect made by a place consecrated for so long to the monastic life. How were we going to transform into pictures the impressions we had since received?

We could, of course, show the physical aspect of it easily enough: the tufted woods, the grandiose and empty monasteries and the picturesque villages of monks. But how convey a certain mystical current at which we ourselves could still only guess, since it revealed itself only in silences, here and there? Father Gregory had been the first to make us feel that, for him, perfection might well reside in a sense of religious mystery and in the need to communicate with the divine. We had to get this into our film, but how?

As the boat carried Georges and me towards Daphne, I considered the problem in all its aspects without yet reaching a solution.

Gilbert was waiting on the quay when we moored. He had

twenty-five letters for us to read on the way to St Anne. We savoured our correspondence like gourmets, breathing in the bouquet of each letter before getting down to the detail in a second reading. And then, in order to spin out the pleasure, we each passed on our news to the others, skipping the more personal bits from wives or sweethearts.

At St Anne a monk allowed us to use one of the rooms in his house as a store-room. It was not very far from the harbour and we decided to take up our gear in one journey. I beat my record load: 140 pounds on my back, up a perilous goat-track, in a temperature of ninety-five degrees in the shade.

We then went up to the guest-house which was one of the topmost buildings, on the heights overlooking a vast horizon. The *skete* stretched far up the mountainside, and it took us nearly an hour to reach our resting place. As we passed a little *kelli* buried in greenery, a monk popped out.

'Kalimera.'

'Good-day, sirs,' he replied in French.

He must have been about fifty. Smiling and a little awkward, he stammered a few words in French.

'Welcome to St Anne. I have heard of you; Frenchmen, architects. I am a painter.'

'A painter? May we come and visit you?'

'Please do. You are staying here?'

'Yes, for a few days. We are going to make a film.'

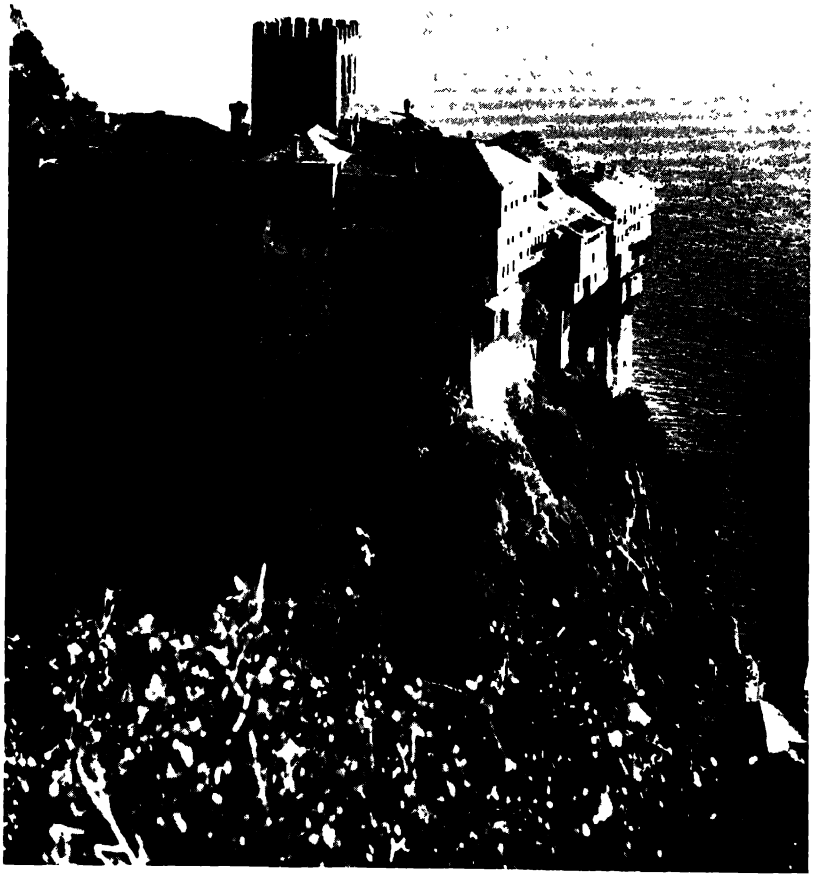
'Good, then come and see me. I like Frenchmen very much.'

The guest-house adjoined the church. The two hostellers were the opposite of each other. The elder ignored us, with a surly look, while the other, Father Antonio, sat us down in the dark dining hall with its smoke-blackened walls and its dusty furniture. We threw off our rucksacks and in silence bit into the little loaves Father Antonio had brought us, with olives, tomatoes swimming in oil and one smoked herring each. Our tiredness gave a new relish to the frugal menu of the holy mountain.

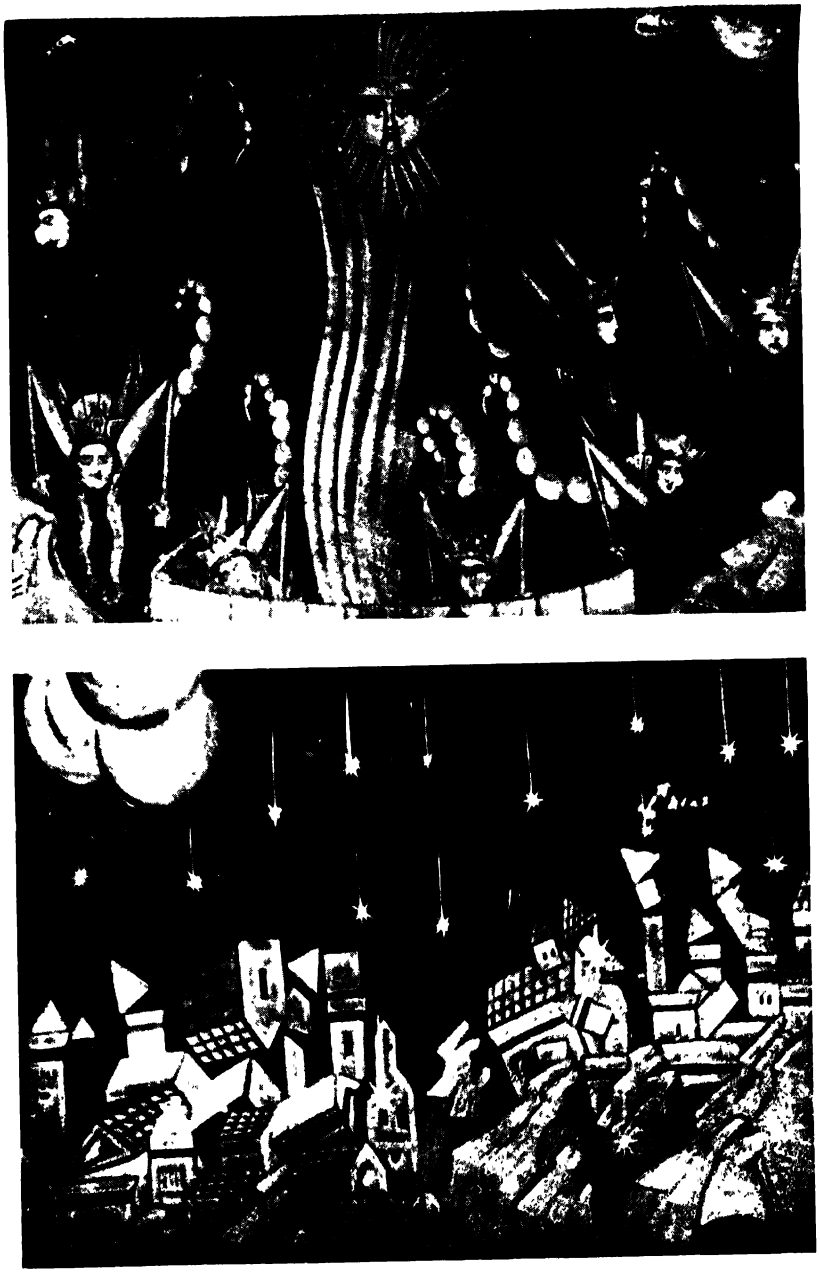
Our room, rather apart, was an ideal retreat. There we could

The *skete*, or village community, of Kapsokalyvia

St Anne: Father Eugene, just before he was overcome with remorse at consenting to being filmed



Dionysiou in the evening light



Dionysiou: details from the fresco of the Apocalypse, interpreted for us as prophecies of modern warfare

shut ourselves up to write our scenario. The balcony overlooked the *skete,* stretching in terraces down to the sea.

Inquisitive, Father Antonio hovered round our camera and the rest of our cinematic equipment. We took the opportunity to explain our plan of staying with him for some days, and suggested that we should pay a small rent. He agreed, smiling, and from the first shared cigarette we were good friends.

We began work straight away.

'You know, there's an important link missing in our story,' said Georges. 'Karoulia, the hermits' cliff.'

'Yes, but we know enough to give us a basis.'

'Look, let's decide first on the places we've got to include. It seems to me that we should start off with the big monasteries, beginning with Chilandari.'

'We mustn't leave out Panteleimon, not because it's so picturesque but because of its size and because it's Russian.'

'And Vatopedi, because it's still fairly active.'

'Dionysiou is indispensable because of its fortress look. The chief problem to be solved will be to find the monks in those enormous, empty monasteries. They'll all go to earth in their cells.'

There were three main dangers to avoid: we mustn't bring back a dreary documentary composed of historic shots with commentary; we mustn't put the accent on decadence by endless shots of empty courts crossed by the occasional black silhouette; nor must we concentrate exclusively on the places where there were many signs of religious activity, since in doing that, too, we would be giving a false picture. The truth lay in getting the right proportions. And in addition we had to attempt to get behind appearances and reach the heart of a life made up of renunciation of the world and the practice of penitence.

Our discussion was lively. Ideas flew, good and bad. Clichés and platitudes were rejected, but it was just as well to express them in order to get rid of them.

The conversation became more and more involved and Georges filled a whole book with notes. Nothing positive came

out of it, even though each of us relaxed in the position most favourable to inspiration: one lay on the floor, another on a bed, and I sat astride a chair or paced up and down the room. The ashtrays were overflowing and the smoke stung our eyes. We decided to go out and have a look at the *skete*, to refresh ourselves.

The church, as usual, was shut. We had to ask Father Antonio to show it to us. It had a mortuary chapel next to it. In the porch was kept a sort of handcart with a rail round it, doubtless a sort of provisional coffin since the monks are finally buried without one. Through an air-hole we could see hundreds of skulls and heaps of shin-bones; it was the *skete*'s charnel-house.

It was the hour when the cisterns were slowly emptying and the gardens were flooding with coolness and sap. It breathed the same peace and serenity as Kapsokalyvia. There was no one about; the monks went early to bed, and we followed their example.

I was woken by the first light of dawn at about six o'clock. Georges and Gilbert were still asleep on their wooden beds without blankets. Our gear was spread all over the table and on a chair there was a box of cigarettes, still containing about thirty. My eyes were half-shut when the door began to open gently. Father Antonio crept in. I played 'possum. He looked at us one after the other, then slowly crossed the room, took a cigarette from the box and went out on the balcony to smoke it. Some minutes later he came back, gazed at the box again and then, after giving a quick look round to reassure himself that we were still asleep, pocketed a handful of cigarettes and slipped through the door, shutting it without a sound.

After two days of discussion we had the general outline of our scenario. We could not foretell each scene or shot exactly, since we wanted to remain free to adapt ourselves to circumstances.

We would use the monasteries to show the communal side of the religious life on Athos and its organization, fairly lax in the idiorhythmic houses and stricter in the houses with

coenobitic rule; but particularly we would use them to show their decline and the tepid religious life lived by the monks.

'We must emphasize the things which make these monasteries different from ours in the west,' said Gilbert who, though not much bitten by the cinema bug, was beginning to take things seriously. 'The little private apartments at Vatopedi and the houses at the Great Lavra give a marvellous impression of the idiorhythmic life, which seems so odd to westerners. And we must get in "Byzantine time", and the mules, and the chanting—it's all wonderful local colour.'

Then I chimed in with my ideas on what was most helpful in introducing the spectator to the monasteries: the *semantron*, the services with their tiny congregations, seasonal activities such as woodcutting and the wine harvest—anything that would explain the way the monks lived. The shut libraries: they despised knowledge.

'Their life being so remote from any intellectual notions. We know it—but it won't be easy to convey.'

'Wait,' I said, 'I believe I've got an idea. The frescoes. . . .'

'What about them? What can one do with painted walls?'

'Yes, but they venerate the frescoes. You've only got to show the scratched-out devils to understand what they mean to them.'

'So what? It's just that the representation of evil gives them gooseflesh,' cut in Georges.

'They approach pictures rather as children do,' I went on, 'pictures are more than symbols in their eyes. Some parts of the frescoes express their faith better than anything else you can think of. The sober rural life of Athos, prayer, prostration in the chapels—these are the things that ensure them a future life, and that's all that matters to them. The spiritual ladder fresco could be very interesting in this way. Couldn't it be used to show the ideas they hold on their ascension to heaven?'

'Even better,' said Georges, 'it could provide a sort of framework for the whole film: The Spiritual Ladder. Every one of the monks is on a rung, more or less high, in the accomplishment of his religious life.'

We recapitulated: first part—the big empty monasteries

where men lived on the margin of the world, with no particular religious fervour. Time mattering not at all. The great clock at Chilandari ringing through the silent courtyards. The *semantron* calling the monks to prayer.

Second part—life in the *sketes*, with the active gardeners, painters and artisans. The groups taking instruction from a spiritual leader: a sort of forcing house for the various methods of developing the inner life.

Third part—the hermits, still unknown to us, but whom we knew to live in silence and asceticism in niches cut in the rock of the Karoulia cliff.

'And we can end,' said Georges, laughing, 'with a panoramic shot of the sky, which is their target. I can see that we are in for a good month's work and porterage, always at the hottest times of the day!'

At that stage we had to start thinking out each detail of each part. Georges was swamped. He filled whole note-books with the points we raised, and then had to classify them.

In one more day our plan would be ready. But something was going on. The cross old hosteller, who till now had been avoiding us, suddenly burst into our room and bundled all our equipment out on to the landing—a gesture which spoke for itself. But why? We suspected at once that Father Antonio, to whom we gave the money for our board, was keeping it for himself. At that moment he appeared, handsome and smiling. When he heard what was happening he roared with laughter and explained, with gestures, that he would clear up the misunderstanding.

Our two hosts must have sorted it out, because during the afternoon the gloomy monk came to make honourable amends in his own way by suggesting that we should visit the church which contained the relics of St Anne. He signed to us to wait by the rood-screen and reappeared a few minutes later with a simple wooden casket. He opened it and took out a silver sandal, finely worked. It had a cover where the ankle would emerge, which he lifted carefully. Inside there was a mummified foot, cut off at the ankle, which exactly fitted the silver sandal.

'St Anne's foot,' he told us.

We stared at it for some time in silence, then suddenly, click! and the monk shut the cover and disappeared muttering behind the screen. He waved us out of the church, still mumbling. Had we been lacking in piety? Should we have kissed the sandal? The old man's fits of temper were certainly disconcerting.

Between working hours we wandered all over the *skete*. Many of the monks now knew us and greeted us as we passed.

One evening we paid Father Eugene the visit he had suggested on the day of our arrival. He greeted us eagerly with a flood of words.

He lived in astonishing poverty. The wooden veranda which we had to cross to reach the door was rotten. It sagged outwards and in order not to slip on the damp wood we had to clutch the rail. The house was smothered by trees, vines and ivy and would probably have collapsed without their support. The door was so low that we had to stoop to enter. Inside it smelt of damp. No furniture. Stairs of crumbling wood led up to the bedroom, the walls of which were covered with mould. A door on the right led into the chapel and one on the left into another whitewashed room, almost as empty as the first, with only two rickety chairs and two shelves. The floor had given way and the ceiling had become pot-bellied, revealing its lathes. One of the chairs, with its legs sawn off, was used as a stool.

We sat on the floor and began chatting. Father Eugene refused our cigarettes. He didn't smoke—like most of the monks except Father Antonio.

We were soon on the subject of painting. Gilbert had brought his water-colours, which delighted the good monk.

'*Kala, kala, polykala.* Ah! Vatopedi! The Great Lavra!'

'Do you ever paint landscapes?'

'No, never.'

'But why not?'

'It's not the custom.'

'What do you paint?'

'Only Our Lord. And the lives of the martyrs, of course.'

He pointed to a drawing on the wall which showed a martyr being tortured on the wheel. His drawing was bad and his painting was childish.

'Have you got anything else?'

'Oh yes, but it's not as good as your paintings.'

He brought out a bundle of magazines, newspapers and packing paper which he had decorated with his drawings.

'This one is the martyrdom of a saint, but it's not finished yet.'

'And this one?'

'That's God on the summit of Athos. Didn't you recognize Him?'

'But of course! Only why did you put Him on the summit of Athos?'

'Because He lives there.'

We went on studying the pile of drawings and paintings, all executed on horrid scraps of yellowing paper.

'When do you do your painting?'

'Between my prayers.'

'Do you pray much?'

'Yes, night and day.'

'Are you free to employ your time as you wish?'

'Oh yes, I can pray whenever I want to.'

He laughed, and seemed surprised that we should ask such questions, but he took us into his chapel.

'Why are you asking me all this?'

'We like to learn how you live here.'

'Well, I pray——' and he mimed his attitude of prayer before the lectern. 'In the winter, when it's cold, it's hard to get up in the middle of the night.'

He said it with a smile, and then, as he was taking us back to his work:

'I have great difficulty in finding paper,' and he stroked Gilbert's sketch book. We took the hint and promised that when we left we would give him any unused books.

Then we started talking about Paris and the Louvre.

'Unfortunately I've never seen it,' he said, becoming wistful

for the first time. 'But I like Rubens very much—I'd like to have a book of his paintings.'

His last work was being passed from hand to hand: a little carved ikon, like those we saw at Karyes: the same shape, the same technique.

'Would you mind if we filmed you while you were carving an ikon?'

'Not at all, I should be very pleased.'

'When can we come?'

'Tomorrow, if you like.'

We arrived at his house at eight o'clock the next morning, with everything we needed to take the pictures.

He swept the room while we unpacked the camera, the containers of film and the tripod. Gilbert put up the reflectors. Georges calculated the light with the exposure meter. He told me the time for the poses from various angles and we were ready to shoot.

Sitting on the little stool, with an ikon in his hand, Father Eugene watched us in silence. He was dumb, as though petrified by the arrangements going on all around him. I turned the camera on him. First I took shots of the room as a whole, then we asked him to start work. He began. The motor buzzed, the light shone on his face, and for almost an hour we filmed him.

Then I wanted to take a close-up. I brought the camera nearer and in the view-finder I could see every detail of his face. I was adjusting the focus and the centring when suddenly I saw through the view-finder that Father Eugene was shrinking. I glanced at his hands, and they were trembling. I worked fast. Then, very pale and stammering, he asked us to go away. He must be alone, he must pray, he told us.

We were abashed. He was so clearly distressed and our gear cluttering his room suddenly embarrassed us. Father Eugene, it seemed, had just realized that it was because of pride that he had allowed us to film him. He, who had been for fifteen years in this place, had given way to worldly vanity. He wanted to shut himself up in his chapel.

At five o'clock next morning, when we were going down to the harbour to catch the boat to Dionysiou, we saw a light burning in his chapel. The Father was still praying in expiation of his sin.

15. The First Set-Back

WE HAD CHOSEN DIONYSIOU for our first operation. It was superb, as challenging as a citadel on the summit of its high cliff. As soon as we arrived I felt that I would work well there. It really was the perfect example of a fortified monastery dating from the days when the monks were besieged by pirates, whether Moslem or Latin. Its defences were turned outwards, towards the sea, and to reach the gates, opening towards the mountain, one had to climb the side of a steep valley which isolated it.

The church, painted bright red, occupied almost the whole of the deep and narrow inner court. Its brilliant colour was reflected on the neighbouring buildings. Dionysiou was built to the human scale; one felt at home there, secure behind the high, close walls, particularly when the porter had just shut the heavy door, strapped with iron.

The white-haired porter and the hosteller were most obliging, forestalling our needs. As soon as we had arranged our things we were offered a meal that matched our hunger, after which we began to look round. As in the northern monasteries, the church and the refectory contained the best decorations, the frescoes covering the walls inside and out.

One of the most interesting represented the Apocalypse, a favourite theme of the painters of Athos. Its culminating scenes are among the most popular throughout the Eastern Church; one of the foundations, in fact, of Orthodox faith. On Mount Athos

the inspired book played the role of a religious system fixing the canons for the world's evolution from the coming of Christianity to the end of time.

The Apocalypse of Dionysiou is well-known and has been studied by specialists. It is supposed to date from the fifteenth century and its author has used the twelve scenes made famous a little earlier by Dürer and Cranach. He may have been inspired by his forerunners, but such a thing is rare in the history of Byzantine painting, which always follows its own rules and is shut off from western influences.

These paintings were almost in monochrome, the colours ranging from yellow ochre to a brownish red. The shadows were simply black. The people were treated in the Byzantine manner, very dark, with big, velvety, almond-shaped eyes. The draperies were stiff, in parallel lines. Each scene was separated from the next by a simple line. They stretched about twenty yards, and went from the Last Judgement to the Fall of Babylon.

Standing before each scene, we tried to recall passages from the text it illustrated. A monk came up just at the right moment to explain it to us—and I must admit that he made the Apostle's prophecies wonderfully clear.

Pointing with a knowing look to a group of locusts in one of the paintings, he said: 'Aeroplanes'. The riders from Hell, mounted on 'Beasts which spat fire' were, according to him: 'Armoured cars'. A third fresco represented an immense, mushroom-shaped column of fire spouting up from a pit: 'The atomic bomb. You can see,' he added, 'how accurate the prophecies were.'

It was not the interpretation of the Apocalypse of St John that we had expected to hear on Mount Athos.

One couldn't help thinking that each age must have found an interpretation for these texts in the events of its own day. It is not too far-fetched, today, to associate the locusts with aeroplanes, since the text says:

And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and

the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle.

From that to aeroplanes is only a step. The Apocalypse's poetic identification of the atomic bomb goes like this:

and I saw a star fall from heaven unto the earth; and to him was given the key of the bottomless pit.

And he opened the bottomless pit; and there arose a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace; and the sun and the air were darkened by reason of the smoke of the pit.

Another monk, Father Sergius, came up and introduced himself.

'I am the Secretary,' he said, in good French. 'Are you getting on all right? We do so like to have visitors from abroad, because they don't often come here. Dionysiou usually only interests connoisseurs. Our frescoes are remarkable, aren't they?'

With his fair beard and his long hair I thought there was something of a Perugini about him. His voice was soft and perhaps a little high-pitched for a man.

'Will you give me the pleasure of taking coffee with me?'

As he led us along a series of dark corridors he went on speaking, without looking at us.

'I know a story—a fine one—which ought to interest you, being French. It's a story from the time of the Crusades, when they attacked our monastery. One day a big ship arrived here. The monks were very frightened and prepared to give battle, but when they saw how well-armed their attackers were they took refuge in the tower from which they could look down on their assailants. The Franks came howling up the path to the gate—and then suddenly, no one could see why, they turned tail and re-embarked as fast as possible. The monks came down from the tower.

'Some years later the same ship came back and the same crusaders attacked the monastery again. This time they got

inside. Their leader called the monks together, looked them over one by one, and then said to the Father Superior: "Tell me, where is the huge man with eyes of flame who turned us back last time. He was all alone on the path by the gate. Where is he?"

'There hadn't been anyone there,' went on the Secretary. 'But I expect you noticed the little oratory on a rock, with a fresco of St Denis, our patron saint? It was he who had risen up in front of the Franks and had driven them off.'

Father Sergius lived on the top floor of the building, overlooking the harbour. He showed us his invention for bringing up the mail direct from the harbour: a rope going down from a window in the passage, falling almost vertically to the hut of the fisherman-monk, on the edge of the sea, and a basket equipped with a little wheel.

Was the Father a trifle coquettish? We had hardly got into his apartment before he went into his kitchen, stood in front of a polished silver plate which he used as a mirror, and began to comb his hair with a feminine gesture. Then he turned and smiled at us:

'Shall I make coffee?'

He tripped about his kitchen, neat in his movements, and as assured as any woman.

From his windows you looked down a long way into the sea. The sun was setting over the water. The Father came and took a seat near us, his legs crossed under his cassock, his hand in his fair hair.

'How lucky you are to live here! What silence—and what a view!'

'Yes, I've certainly got one of the best rooms.'

'What island is that over there?'

'It's not an island, it's a peninsula, Longos. There's an island over to the right, but one can't see it very well in this light. It's called Diasporos, and they once found treasure there. Do you know Docheiariou? Well, the island used once to belong to them and a shepherd monk used to live there, looking after the monastery's flocks. One day he came back to the monastery and

insisted that he must speak to the Abbot. He told him that while he was digging in order to build a shelter, he had found a heavy casket full of precious stones and gold. He went on digging and found other caskets, also full of jewels. It must have been pirates' treasure. He put it all back, filled in the hole and hurried to the monastery. The Abbot praised God for having revealed the treasure, and thanked Him for the help He was giving the monastery. They would build a magnificent church. At supper that evening he told the community about the discovery, and appointed two monks to go with the shepherd and fetch the treasure. Next morning the boat set out and it didn't come back. The monks were appalled. The next day, during a service, a miracle happened. While the Abbot was praying for the souls of the men who had vanished, he suddenly saw beside him the shepherd, dripping wet, with a rope round his neck. "Father," said the shepherd, "we found the treasure and put it in the boat, but as soon as we had started home the other monks threw me into the water with a stone round my neck. They laughed, and before I sank they said: 'We are going away with the treasure and no one will ever hear of us again.' " There have not always been only pious monks on Athos.'

It had grown dark during this story. The Secretary lit an oil lamp. We talked about our jobs and about Paris, which Father Sergius longed to visit, but this kind of talk led nowhere and we said good-bye to our host.

The next day we started to film the monastery and we noticed that, outside the walls, between the gardens and the terrace, there was a little corner of long, rough grass with a few dark wooden crosses, half blown down by the wind: the cemetery.

When a monk dies he takes the place of another, whose remains join those of his predecessors in the community's charnel-house. The little mortuary chapel stands near-by. Its walls were bare, and there were candlesticks neatly aligned, used at funerals when the body is buried without a coffin. Death seemed simple and natural in these surroundings. Peaceful place! No one can ever be born on Athos. People just die there, without tears and without monuments.

When we had finished shooting Georges and I went back into the monastery. It was four o'clock and we could hear the monks chanting the service. Anxious not to disturb them, we slipped quietly into the gallery which ran round the church. I was holding the camera and Georges the exposure meter. We were looking for centrings in order to film the frescoes in the gallery.

Busy about this, I forgot my earlier worries, when I had wondered so anxiously whether the monks would allow us to make a film. We were planning our work on the frescoes with a light heart, when suddenly, up from the church, there came hurtling a great hefty monk. His face scarlet with rage, his mouth full of invective, he pointed a vengeful finger at the camera. He shouted without drawing breath. A monkey-faced lay workman joined in and explained, in German at first and then in English, that the *Epitropi* was protesting because it was forbidden to film the monks.

This was what I had been afraid of—but we were filming the frescoes, not the monks. I tried to explain, as gently as possible, while the *Epitropi* went on storming. It was no good. He didn't want to listen and the layman, with his corn-crake's voice, made it worse. At last, out of patience and driven to outrage, I roared even louder than the two Greeks:

'That's enough! Shut up!'

Stupefied, they ceased yelling. Then I asked the *Epitropi* to convey my apologies to the Fathers praying in the church. The central government at Karyes, they said, had put this ban on filming some days ago.

If that were so, there was nothing more for us to say, but it was disaster.

We had hardly got out into the court before another *Epitropi*, surrounded by monks, attacked us with the same reproaches—it was as though they had passed the word round. Everyone fell silent, however, when Father Sergius appeared. We asked him why there was this sudden animosity against us among the monks. He said that in his opinion we ought not to pay too much attention to the *Epitropi*, who was well-known for his bad

temper. He himself had heard nothing of the Holy Community's ban.

The next day, after a meal in the refectory with the monks, we had a chance to return to this vital question. One of the monks spoke English. We followed him out to question him in the court. He looked round to see if anyone were listening.

'I can quite see,' he said, 'that you are upset after those insults yesterday. But so long as the Abbot himself doesn't tell you that filming is banned, there is hope.' He added: 'I find life hard here, I must admit. I suffer a great deal from my companions' ignorance and roughness. Most of them are quite uneducated and life here becomes very hard after a few years. That's all I can say to you. Good luck.'

We left Dionysiou without filming the monks going about their daily business. It was a pity, because it seemed to me that in this particular coenobitic monastery there were about thirty monks who showed greater animation and a keener sense of community life than any we had met elsewhere.

16. Ikon Painters

BACK AT ST ANNE, we decided to spend one day resting and recharging the batteries and the next filming (we hoped) the group of artists which had collected round Father Daniel, a famous painter now dead, whose disciples carried on his tradition. Father Gregory had praised their skill. They lived much higher up on the plateau, in a little *kelli* attached to the *skete.*

To shorten the walk, we spent the night up at the hospice and began to climb the mountain at dawn, before the sun had appeared above Mount Athos. It was a stiff climb up to the plateau, which was a sort of huge step cut half-way between the sea and the top of the mountain, overlooking the cliff of Karoulia.

Father Daniel's house soon appeared, an oasis of greenery standing out against the arid mountainside. It was well placed near some springs, and sheltered from the wind by Athos. A busy trellis of vines mingled with wistaria covered its four walls—you had only to lift a hand to pick a bunch of black grapes, almost ripe. In the garden there was a rather ugly white stone dedicated to the memory of Father Daniel; the first monument of that kind we had seen on Mount Athos.

We put down our gear in the shade of a bush, and rang. The young monk who came to the door led us into a small, newly whitewashed room on the first floor, opening on to a long covered balcony. Six bells hung from the roof-supports, worked

Dionysiou: one of the *epitropes*

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Stones glared in the sun, and the heat was stifling

by wooden clappers and a network of cords. Everything here seemed comfortable and well kept. The head of the house appeared, old Father Paul, very well turned-out and followed by the traditional *raki*. Young, scarcely bearded monks peered through the windows, as inquisitive as little girls would be in our country.

The talk soon turned to our *idée fixe*: filming the artists at work. At the word 'film' the monk's expression changed and he snapped, 'That's not allowed.'

He told some young monks to take us to the kitchen—on the ground floor—to eat. It was a fine room like a Flemish painting, complete with a spit turned by clock-work and an age-old coffee-mill. The olive oil was stored in old jam tins. A heap of curious objects, products of the monks' ingenuity, was spread on the big stone tables. In the enormous hearth there crackled a fire of vine stems.

After the meal Gilbert made a sketch of the room. The monks were impressed by the speed and accuracy of his drawing and lingered near him in spite of the protests of the old cook, who wanted them to get on with the washing up. In order not to upset their routine any further, we went into the studio—a huge room, one of its walls all window, which would have been the dream of any Paris artist. Ten large, upright, adjustable easels stood in a row, one behind the other. Beside each easel, within reach of the pupil, was a shelf on which were neatly arranged many brushes and tubes of colour. Details from the frescoes were pinned on the wall: heads of angels or the Virgin, haloes and joined hands, all in the academic style. These, it appeared, were studies made by Father Daniel and destined to appear in his pupils' works.

The work of these painters consisted simply in making scrupulous copies of models taken from the monasteries and fixed at the side of each easel.

It was a long way from Gilbert's free, spontaneous methods, and I could understand the surprise shown by the pupils at something so unfamiliar to them. Their own style had been governed by inflexible rules for thousands of years. Their work

showed not the least sign of creative spirit; it was not art, but industry.

The pupils, directed by Father Paul, studied in perfect tranquillity, and through the open windows one could hear the wistaria rustling in the breeze. One of them was drawing, with a compass, the golden halo of an insipid pink-faced Christ. His compass slipped and I could feel his mortification at having bungled his circle while I was watching.

We thought the copies of Byzantine paintings fairly good, but unfortunately they also reproduced the dismal products of decadent Greek religious art: clumsy religious scenes of flaccid-featured holy personages, all eighteen inches square, looking like nothing so much as nasty blue and pink oleographs.

I was a good deal surprised by the material on which the ikons were executed: oil-cloth. Father Paul explained that it was easy to roll up for packing, because these 'works of art' were sold all over the Orthodox countries and even in the United States, among the immigrants. The fact that they came from Mount Athos gave them great artistic and religious value. It was a profitable trade, which explained the comfortable circumstances of these artists, who didn't have to bear the considerable expenses of keeping up a monastery.

As soon as we were alone, comfortably settled on the sofas in the reception room, we began to discuss our disappointment. These monks, after all, felt they were serving God and their faith in their own way, however deplorable it seemed to us. To them it was a form of apostleship. They were bound to obey an artistic canon imposed by the Orthodox Church itself, and their only duty was to conform to the requirements of religion. Our conception of the evolution of the arts and of artistic creation meant nothing here.

Suddenly we heard a raised voice which might have been a woman's. We were startled. Looking into the studio from the balcony I saw a boy of about twelve, reading aloud from a large Bible resting on his knees, sitting among the monks who continued to work away at their easels. He was declaiming a bit, and it was his fluting, high-pitched voice we had taken for a

woman's. Father Paul explained that this child, the eldest of a family of ten, was the nephew of one of the monks. Every year he spent his holidays on Mount Athos and everyone spoilt him. One of them would make him cakes; another would ply him with sweets. The younger monks played with him and everyone was delighted to have him there.

There was nothing left for us to do that day. The air up there was very pure, like mountain air, and we relished the peace. Gilbert settled down to draw in a corner while Georges and I spent the rest of the afternoon watching some ants who were raiding a heap of wheat spread on the balcony, carrying it off to a tiny hole in the garden. Working at that speed it would not take them long to lay up their store for the winter.

On our hands and knees, peering through the view-finder, we began to plan a scenario on the life of the ant. The dangerous moment was when they went over the edge of the balcony. The weaker ones, who had trouble carrying the grain they had stolen, would lose their foothold on the overhang and would fall lightly, supported by the air. Hardly had they arrived on the ground than they would bustle off, apparently undisturbed. The drop was at least two yards.

I fell asleep, my head full of ants in close-up.

PART THREE

17. Father Nicolas

WE WERE TO MEET Father Eugene from St Anne at daybreak, so that he could guide us to the hermits' cliff. It was hardly light when we said good-bye to Father Paul and his artists, but in spite of the early hour they were already busy. Five of them were setting out for Salonika to sell a batch of ikons, and the house was in an uproar. Bags were being strapped up containing the carefully rolled canvases; provisions were being prepared for the first stage of the journey. A mule stood ready saddled under the trellis, being loaded with luggage. On a garden bench were spread black umbrellas and small, old-fashioned attaché cases with brass locks. The bursar, sitting on a step, was having his toe-nails cut by a young monk who crouched in front of him. Both of them were laughing like children.

For this important journey the five travellers had dressed in their Sunday best and were wearing new bonnets. One could feel what an exciting occasion it was for these monks condemned to spend months—or even years—at a time, working in the studio.

In the general bustle no one bothered about us. We made haste to get away before the sun was too high, sorry that we would not be accompanying the outing.

Father Eugene was waiting for us at a fork in the path and his kind face lit up when he saw us. He had obviously recovered from the disturbance caused by our filming.

The sky poured down its intense light. There was not a

tree to be seen on the plateau stretching ahead of us; nothing but stones and debris from the mountain, hard on the feet. Father Eugene led the way, setting a good pace. We passed a little dry-stone hovel where a monk was squatting, apparently asleep. He looked like a tramp in his tattered cassock. Beside him lay a bag made from an old flour-sack belonging to the 'Minnesota Milling Co.'. Father Eugene stopped and spoke to him, then knocked on the door. A big man in his prime, with a thinker's forehead and lively eyes, came to the door, a pen in his hand. He looked at us over his spectacles like a clerk disturbed at his work. His expression remained distant and cold. He listened to Father Eugene, who must have been telling him where we were going. Then he shut his door and we went on.

Walking into the sun, in heat which was becoming almost unbearable, we found the refraction from the white stones very strong. We met an old monk with a Russian accent. After a few minutes' talk Father Eugene proposed a deal:

'The Father will gladly guide us to Karoulia, but you must give him three thousand drachma.'

Apologizing for him, Father Eugene explained that the Russian was very poor. He was admitting, without saying so, that he himself did not really know the way.

We had now reached the vertical cliff face. The drop made us dizzy. The stony path petered out among rocks. We followed each other down, taking care that the stones we dislodged, which plunged into the sea far beneath us, should not hit those in front.

This really was the only approach to Karoulia. The trace of pathway became narrower and narrower and we went slowly, hampered by the weight of our rucksacks which pushed us forward. Sometimes we had to go sideways. Father Eugene stopped and took off his shoes. He carried them in his hand and claimed that it was safer. Here and there chains had been fastened to the rock to help the climber. We found breathing difficult. The blinding light and the heat were suffocating, as though we were in front of a gaping furnace. The old Russian

had a difficult time—he was certainly earning his three thousand drachma. He left us at a fork in the path, pointing out the house of Father Nicolas, a Russian monk, which was about fifteen yards lower down. It was a wooden hut roofed with corrugated iron, perched on a little terrace. Two meagre bushes with skimpy leaves sketched a pattern of pale green on the background of sun-blanched stone.

A few minutes later Father Eugene knocked on the little wooden door and, always voluble, began to announce to the hermit that he had brought some Frenchmen. No doubt he was going on to tell him all about us but, though I don't know what the hermit said, I got the impression that he put him in his place. Father Eugene looked snubbed and went to sit in a corner, silent at last.

The hermit then turned to us and said, in the most perfect French:

'Please come in, gentlemen—come in and flop.'

No word could have better expressed what we needed to do after that walk. No doubt he was alluding to his snub to Father Eugene when he added, in rather a malicious voice: 'Silence is the rule here—or discretion, at least.'

Father Nicolas was seventy. Small, gay, with sparkling eyes, wrinkles and a sparse beard, he looked rather like a Chinese *bonze*. His cassock was supposed to be black but had gone greenish and was torn at the back from the waist to the hem. He held it together with one hand and asked us to excuse his lack of elegance.

'What are your names?'

'Jacques Valentin.'

'What do you do?'

'I'm an architect.'

'And you?'

'Georges Schaetzel, in publicity.' (What irony, in these surroundings—but the Father never blinked.)

'And you?'

'Gilbert Denise, architect.'

'Well now, Valentin, and you two, you must be thirsty.'

We followed him into a lean-to against the hut where a sort of wooden locker covered a cistern into which the Father dipped a small bucket on a chain. Having drawn the water he shut the opening which closed as hermetically as a milk churn. From a shelf to the left, at eye-level, five jawless skulls were staring at us.

'My predecessors,' introduced Father Nicolas, half serious and half ironic. The name and the date of death were written on each forehead.

The cool water was marvellous, and we suddenly felt full of the tremendous peace which reigned on this belvedere hanging over emptiness.

The cabin was no more than eight yards long and was divided into two rooms. In the bedroom was a bed made of two planks with a patina coming from long use, with two blankets rolled up at one end. A cupboard, a small bookshelf full of books in red bindings, a table, paper, and an ink-pot—that was all. In the next room there were a few almonds on a table, an old stove and a safe hooked to the ceiling containing just one bunch of grapes and a piece of cheese. The shelves of an open dresser were empty, except for a few odd plates.

The Father apologized for his 'garden', now transformed into a work-yard since the roof was being repaired. He had to get help from passing monks or from the younger hermits so that the job, which an expert could have finished in a few days, had dragged on for eight years. A pomegranate tree and a weedy almond which only bore fruit every two years were more or less buried under sheets of corrugated iron.

'Come and look round the estate.'

We went down three or four steps and found on a lower terrace another hut, surmounted by a Russian cross in copper, with the ball lopsided: the chapel. It was tiny, the whole interior Lilliputian, particularly the two stalls.

'I've been praying here for many years,' said the Father.

There was nothing but sea in front of us. I leant out a bit to see the rest of the cliff, which plunged straight down into the water. The Father pointed out the continuation of the path

which twisted on between rocks and prickly pears, as thorny as cacti.

'That's the hermits' orchard,' he said with a laugh. 'We have the right to eat prickly pears as dessert, but if you want to taste them I advise you to pick them before the sun comes up. They're uneatable when they're warm.'

'What else do you eat?' I asked.

'I have a friend at the Great Lavra who sometimes brings me food. And then the monasteries send us supplies every two months. It's usually the remains of the bread which they collect after meals. When it gets here it's hard and dry, but you only have to soak it a little.' He broke off to say: 'Look. Down there rather to the left, at the bottom of the cliff; they built that jetty a little while ago. That's where the boats are supposed to tie up when they bring food, but usually they can't because of the waves. The younger hermits throw down baskets tied to ropes and we bring them up with a pulley. You can't see it from here. Perhaps you know that the cliff is called Karoulia and that *karoulia* is Greek for pulley?'

'Are there many hermits here?'

'Yes, there are ten of us, but you can't see all the houses from this terrace because they are hidden by rocks.'

One of them, on a projection of the cliff opposite us, was perched on a pyramid of very narrow little terraces, one above another. The one where we were was well-placed, sheltered from the north wind which can be very cold in winter. The rock shelf on which it stood, which was almost invisible from the sea, had once been a pirates' hide-out.

'My predecessors built the terrace,' went on Father Nicolas. 'They had to spend many years bringing down handfuls of earth for the garden. It had to be fetched from the top of the cliff, on the plateau where Father Daniel's gardens flourish—so near, and yet so far. Nowadays I feel no need to go there.'

'Do you leave the cliff from time to time?'

'I haven't budged for two years. In the winter there's ice on the path and I have fallen twice. The last time I fell I broke my arm, and I was unconscious for half a day. My neighbour

opposite, whose house you can see—he's even older than I am —he began to worry when he didn't see me in my garden. He came out to find me, and he must have had a terrible job to reach me in spite of his age. I've no idea how he got me back to my house. The ice made the cliff almost inaccessible so they couldn't take me to hospital till a month later. I just wasn't able to climb up to the plateau.'

'Where did you go?'

'To the hospital in Salonika. While I lay there in bed I kept on wondering what had caused my two falls; they vexed me very much. If it was old age, then I should have to make up my mind never to leave my platform, and that would be very serious for me, both physically and morally. I have no intention of letting myself go soft because—I'm sure you agree—once one gives up one's no good for anything. Luckily I discovered the reason for my accidents. It was my sandals!'

He showed us his flat sandals, their soles worn smooth.

'I hadn't enough money to buy new ones—but anyway, there's no point. It's just a matter of taking care.'

'What do you live on? Do the hermits have any money?'

'They live on what they've got, but they need very little. Sometimes the younger ones go out to work at a monastery in order to earn a little money, and that will keep them here for several years.'

'How does one get one of these hermitages?'

'You have to live for many years in a monastery in order to become a priest and be moulded to the religious life. Each hermitage belongs to a monastery, and you have to wait for death to make a vacancy. And death is the only road by which one can leave the cliff—not that any of us wish to leave.'

The conversation quickly became a monologue. Completely won over, we listened while he went on talking very simply and in the most perfect French. One foot resting on the little earthen wall of the terrace, he answered all our questions calmly and more freely than we had dared to hope.

Father Nicolas had lived on Mount Athos for over nineteen years. Before becoming a hermit he had spent seven years in

the Great Lavra. He prayed nineteen hours a day, slept for four hours and allowed one hour for preparing his meals, mending his clothes, cleaning his house and the chapel and, in winter, getting water from the cistern. This explained his unkempt condition.

We told him our impressions of the painters' house, to see what he thought.

'We were rather disappointed by their work. How can they go on copying indefinitely, without ever attempting to create anything? We find it hard to understand such total lack of experiment. We can see that they have a reason for copying ancient things, to disseminate them, but why should they always do it in the same way, and with so little taste?'

The Father listened with interest.

'Do you think it's right,' we asked, 'that the faithful should be given ugly things to look at?'

'The paintings have a religious function,' answered the Father, 'and the public likes them.'

'Couldn't they be made to like something else?'

'The important thing is to excite people's interest, even if it is with ugly things. Isn't the same thing done at Lourdes?'

We could find no answer to that argument, and it occurred to us for the first time that perhaps Father Nicolas was a travelled man. We longed to know more about him and his experience of Mount Athos. We told him about our perplexity at the religious principles of the monastic communities and the *sketes*, and he seemed satisfied that we really wanted to learn. Too often, he told us, visitors are content with a quick tour of the peninsula, and leave with false ideas.

18. A Hermit's Memories

AFTER A LONG SILENCE which Father Nicolas seemed content to leave unbroken, one of us picked up the conversation again and the hermit responded, though without answering our question directly.

'The fact that these men put the world and its false values behind them—isn't that in itself enough to give their faith and their conception of life a real importance?'

Suddenly it seemed as though he would embrace the chance of explaining his life after so many years of silence. He began to take the lead in our talk again, while we sat before him like attentive schoolboys. And then—perhaps he wanted to prevent us from taking advantage of his broad-mindedness (he even used Parisian slang)—then he suddenly began talking about Atlantis! According to him, the civilization of Crete was a survival from the lost continent. Georges happened to be fond of this subject, too, and the Father went indoors and fetched from his bookshelf a book on Atlantis which Georges had been looking for in vain for years—and insisted on giving it to him.

'Take it, Georges, take it. I shall be glad for you to have it.'

He also took the opportunity to bring out two fat books which he asked us to take—if they would not be too heavy—and return to the Mother Superior of a Russian convent in Paris, who had lent them to him. 'She's an old friend of mine,' he said.

Sometimes he would be at a loss for a word, and each time

he said: 'I'm getting soft, I'm getting soft.'

He had once spoken four languages fluently, he said, but living alone between sea and sky he could no longer keep them up. The fear of losing his memory haunted him and every time we protested he said: 'Yes, *papa*, yes, I know—but I'm getting soft all the same.'

'Do you get visitors from abroad?'

'Very few.'

'Do you ever see ships going by?'

'They pass sometimes, but far out. It's very stormy in winter and the cape has a bad reputation for shipwrecks. The most famous of them happened a long time ago—a flagship with a Persian general on board, what was his name, now . . . You know whom I mean, one of Xerxes' generals. Now I must remember his name. . . . He was famous, and three hundred of his ships were thrown on the rocks during the storm. Now I've got to remember his name—wait a minute.'

He went into the house and came back carrying, to our great surprise, the *Petit Larousse.*

'I'm sure I'll find it. Ah yes! Mardonius. Mardonius. If I forget just one word, you see, I'll be done for. Then it will be two, then ten, and I'll have gone soft. Did you think of looking up "Mount Athos" in *Larousse*?'

'No, I must admit it didn't occur to us.'

Perched as we were on this desolate cliff, over fifteen hundred feet above the sea at the extreme tip of the holy peninsula in the company of this mischievous-eyed hermit, it was very odd to hear read: 'Mount Athos, a promontory situated to the north-east of Greece at the northern end of Chalkidhiki, covered with large monasteries in which the monks manufacture curious manuscripts.'

The Father was delighted with the effect he had made.

'There you are, *papa.* That's just what you've been seeing, isn't it?'

A yellow photograph fell out of the dictionary.

'An old souvenir of the Russo-Japanese war.'

'Were you in it?'

'Yes, I commanded a cavalry regiment at the battle of Mukden. One of my brothers was killed at my side. Look, that's him, on the right.'

We looked at a group of mounted soldiers against a snowy slope.

'It was still a good life in Russia, in those days.'

'You knew Russia under the Tsars?'

'Yes, indeed, in the reign of Alexander III and then Nicolas II. I can still remember the great parties at St Petersburg when they decorated the drawing-rooms with mimosa brought by special train from your Côte d'Azur. Tell me something—the other day I was trying to remember the name of the latest bomb.'

Rather surprised, we answered: 'The atom bomb?'

'No, no,' he said, with an almost ironic smile. 'That one's out of date. The new one.'

'You mean the H-bomb?'

'That's it, the H-bomb. There you are, you see, I'm getting soft.'

'How do you keep so up to date?'

'I get sent a few reviews—*The National Geographic* from Washington, for one. It's very interesting.'

And to let us judge for ourselves, he fetched a few copies from his room. His magazines piled up in the post office at Daphne until such time as a monk bound for the end of the peninsula was willing to take them with him.

He told us, too, about his world-wide correspondence: an Australian lady, an Englishman, various Americans. Then we were interrupted by Father Eugene who clearly thought he had done enough penance in his corner.

We looked at our watches—we had been with the Father for several hours and it was time to go. But our host intervened:

'But my children, what about grub?'

'We're not hungry, Father.'

'Now now, *papa*, I know what it is to be young. You're always all stomach.'

We insisted, because it was, after all, not the first time we

had gone without lunch. We needed only another drink of water, because even sitting there without moving we were sweating all the time. However, he was not to be put off.

'Unfortunately I've got nothing to give you, but one of my neighbours will get you some lunch. You must go down to Father Serafin, just below.'

He also advised us to visit a little hut high, high above, hardly visible, stuck like an eagle's nest at the top of the cliff: it was the Archangel's house, inhabited by a monk called Gabriel. And we should also visit two of his old Russian friends who lived on another part of the cliff-face.

Standing on his terrace, Father Nicolas watched us clambering down the steps cut in the rock, clutching the chain—the same steps on which he had fallen.

Father Serafin welcomed us with a smile and invited us to sit on his terrace while he prepared a meal. Immensely tall and very thin, he looked like someone out of Buchenwald. He, too, was Russian, and he spoke no French.

He disappeared into his dilapidated cabin. The silence was complete. There wasn't even a cicada in the almond tree, the only tree in the garden, under which we were sitting on the ground. The sea beat against the rocks just below but oddly enough we couldn't hear it, owing to the way the platform was cut back into the rock. It was just as well not to go too near the edge, because it was crumbling.

The meal was ready and Father Serafin came to call us. The sky was visible through the roof of his hovel and neither the door nor the windows would shut. It was so small that we could only just get in pressed closely together, and our heads touched the ceiling. A groggy box served as a table and planks resting on other boxes made the benches on which we sat, our legs screwed sideways. Places were laid on a very clean blue cloth: three tin cans of water, three plates and in the middle a dish of dry bread swimming in water.

In spite of the stifling heat we felt the full value of Father Serafin's hospitality. He brought in three tomatoes and some coarse salt in a twist of newspaper. Then he came back with a

second dish, a hot one—rice, very well cooked on heaven knows what stove. Later Father Eugene told us that the monk had given us half his ration for the year. We were embarrassed at eating in front of Father Eugene who stood there watching us with the benevolent look of a man giving a treat to a group of children. The meal ended with a few almonds.

Out on the terrace again, Father Eugene told us that it was time to leave the hermit to his solitude. We had a discreet discussion among ourselves about leaving some money and while the others were saying good-bye I went in and put it on the table. The monk saw, however, and forced us angrily to take it back. Then he spoke to Father Eugene who explained:

'The hermit doesn't want any money. He is only too glad that God has sent him strangers to entertain.'

As though he were going to see us again next day, Father Serafin hardly turned to watch our departure.

Father Eugene wanted to show us the rest of the cliff, but we would have to hurry because he was anxious to be home before nightfall. We followed the side of the rocky wall down a path just about fit for chamois. The next hermitage came in sight, a stage lower down, entirely surrounded by a high dry-stone wall. The hermit who lived there evidently wanted to deprive himself even of the sight of the sea. Not the smallest shrub, not the shadow of a leaf appeared in the yard, and all we could see of the house was a corrugated iron roof covered with stones to prevent it being blown off by the wind. The door was shut and the hermit didn't answer.

We continued on our way along the side of the precipice, about a hundred and twenty feet above the sea. We had to go down, then up, then down again, then, after this scenic railway, plunge into a fault in the cliff, where we found the last house: the house of the pulley, perched on a rocky spur jutting out into the sea. The pulley was fastened to a stout wooden bar on the balcony, and it was here that the monks did their revictualling, as Father Nicolas had told us. The waves just below us exploded against the rock wall which ran vertically into the water.

So far we had only glimpsed Karoulia. Behind the 'pulley house' we found ourselves at the foot of a great smooth wall which we had to scale with the help of two ladders bolted to the rock, with a chain to hang on to. Then there was another fault in the cliff and we had to make our way round an inlet on a ledge which, for some fifty yards, was no more than nine inches wide. We could see emptiness between our legs and, right below, foam on the deep green sea. The best way to manage was to flatten oneself face to the rock and take slow, sideways steps. Our rucksacks were a nuisance again, pulling us outwards as we went. At last the path grew wider and we came to an enormous cave whose clay floor was almost untrodden. A skull and some bones were scattered on the ground.

'A hermit used to live there,' explained Father Eugene. 'It was quite a short time ago that the hermits of Karoulia started living in houses. Before that they lived in caves and the last troglodyte died only a few months ago.'

Another ten minutes' climbing, and the cliff showed a new aspect: a little creek with a reinforced concrete jetty and a shelter built of stones. One side of it was as sheer as the wall we had come along. On the other, the slope was milder, and a series of little houses with slate-covered domes climbed up to the top in a 'pyramid of ivory towers' topped by Father Gabriel's house which perched audaciously above the steepest fall. It was arid: nothing but stones and yellow ochre rocks bleached by the sun. Watching the violence of the waves we could well imagine the difficulty of landing from the sea.

The hermits were not only separated from the rest of the world, but from each other: we had just climbed for half an hour to reach houses only fifty yards away as the crow flies.

Father Eugene was in a hurry and we too were anxious to get off that burning wall before the light went so that we could reach Father Daniel's house for the evening. We would come back to the cliff next day, to finish our work. The last part of the climb, up hairpin bends, was deadly. The sun was shining right on to the cliff, which acted as a reflector. To cover the few hundred yards which separated us from the plateau was a real

torture and when we reached it, the path to the painters' oasis, which had been such stiff going that morning, seemed quite easy.

When we arrived Father Daniel's bells were ringing the Angelus, the house was quiet, two monks were working in silence at their easels and the bunches of grapes on the trellis were warmed by the sun. There were chairs; there was shade. The ants must have been working well all day, because the heap of grain had grown much smaller. Knocked out by the heat, dead-beat, dazed with sun—where had we come from? We had come from Hell—a hell of holy men.

19. Hermits are not Born

WE HAD DECIDED to leave for Karoulia in order, this time, to take photographs and to film. We were anxious to know whether the hermits would consent to pose for us. Yesterday Father Nicolas had refused to let me take a photograph of him, but it was possible that he might intercede for us with the others. It had been agreed that I should go ahead on reconnaissance, to win over Father Nicolas if I could. Georges and Gilbert would follow later.

I stuffed my rucksack with the camera, the batteries, the lenses and film, and a little food. It came to a load of sixty-five pounds and the others would carry the same. In order to reach the cliff before the sun got there I went as fast as possible, but alas! I had started too late, having overslept because of yesterday's exhausting excursion, and the sun beat me to it. By the time I reached the rubble path the heat was already overwhelming. The weight of my load made the passage even worse than it had been before. I re-doubled my care—my load was worth more than the price of a car.

I reached Father Nicolas's house safely and he greeted me without surprise, saying: 'Jacques, how are you? And where are Georges and Gilbert?'

'They're following.'

'Good, sit down. Some cool water? You're lucky—there are no springs at Karoulia but the cistern is still full from the heavy

rains we had last winter. Some summers are so dry that we have to ration water, and that's no joke in this climate.'

I could believe it, since I needed at least two pints of water to restore me after my walk.

The Father led me round behind his house and showed me the apparatus by which, in winter, he collected the rain running off the rocks. Little gutters of cement had been stuck to the rock wall to catch the water and canalize it into the cistern. In order to increase the supply, tins had been fixed at other points too distant to be linked with the main system. I could imagine all the coming and going it would necessitate in the winter—the cement would crack in the frost and have to be repaired. It was real termites' work. I congratulated the Father who answered simply: 'I should have nothing to drink without it.'

I brought up the subject I had on my mind. I explained that we were here to make a film.

'And you want me to help you?' broke in the Father.

'Well, more or less.'

'Tell me first what you mean to put in this film. I know you have had the sense to make a long stay in Athos, but you have to live here for years before you can really get the feeling of the place. And so much nonsense has been retailed about Athos that I'm always suspicious of travellers' tales. Something very odd once happened to me, which will explain why I'm anxious about what you are going to say in your film. Two years ago I got a telegram from Washington. My brother was very ill and his wife wanted me to go to him. The telegram was rather late in arriving because I don't get my post regularly, but I decided to start off at once. It was seventeen years since I had been off the peninsula. I left Karoulia and managed to get together enough money for my passage on an old Greek cargo ship which took me from Piraeus to the Gulf of Mexico in seven weeks. From there I hitch-hiked to New York which I already knew from going there fairly often after the 1914 war. I was just opposite Brooklyn, near the fish-market, enjoying the city again after all those years, when suddenly my foot caught in a piece of newspaper lying on the pavement. Imagine my

astonishment when I saw the headline: MONKS OF ATHOS LIVE NAKED. Just imagine it! So, you see, that's why I want to know what you are going to say.'

'I'd be the first to admit that it's a complex subject and I can promise you that we are only aiming at the truth. We did see a naked monk at St Panteleimon, but if we showed him in our film we'd give the context providing the explanation of that form of asceticism. It's from the human and spiritual point of view that we want to understand Mount Athos, and I'm delighted to be able to discuss it with you, who have been here so long.'

'And you think you can understand everything. It's very difficult.'

'I only want not to make mistakes. For instance, we've gained the impression that in the monasteries religious life is little more than routine.'

'That's just what I was saying. It's difficult for you to judge. You're young men, busy with worldly activities, and you can't grasp the use of those who live a life of meditation far from the world—of those who augment the universe's reserves of spirituality by their prayers. You may have come across men whose behaviour didn't seem to you to be edifying, but monks are not always granted the privilege of an unshakeable faith. One only achieves it gradually, and each according to his means.'

'Yes, but it seems to me that one is more conscious of the search for spiritual perfection in the *sketes*, and still more with solitaries, like you.'

'Life in a monastery may be considered a stage necessary to the man who seeks to vanquish self and live a holy life.'

'The consummation is the hermit's life, all the same.'

'You're mistaken, my dear Jacques. It may be more difficult to live in complete solitude, but it's not desirable for everyone. Have you really understood all that life in the *sketes* can give? That's another stage. The monks in those little peasant communities live in fairly normal conditions, not unlike those they knew before in their own countries and with their families.

They follow a rule which may be less hard than that in the monasteries, but they benefit from the closest contact with nature, which is most helpful to the soul seeking to draw nearer to God. And besides, they are in daily touch with their director, and most men need help and direction in their spiritual life. Living in a group, under the direction of a master, it is quite possible to learn to pray with the necessary rigour.'

'Do these spiritual families really succeed in forming holy men?'

'Indeed they do.'

'And the monasteries?'

'It's there that one acquires the first virtue essential to any religious life: renunciation of the self—I mean total obedience. Don't think that it's easy, when one arrives from one's city or village, to break all the links which attach you to the world, to forget all your affections and your weaknesses. It takes years (seven, perhaps) to reach complete renunciation of your personality. And little by little, year by year, it's obedience that leads one to the complete detachment in which a man no longer puts up opposition and ought not even to form his own judgement about what is good and what is bad.'

'But doesn't this total obedience, this forbidding of any initiative or judgment, end by eclipsing a man—dulling him in some way?'

'Come now, Jacques, I surely don't have to explain to you that the better you know how to master yourself and to obey a spiritual father, for example, the greater the strength of soul which allows you to be your own guide. It's obedience which teaches the greatest self-mastery, but you have to struggle for years to achieve it.'

'I can see that hermits aren't born. I suppose that in order to live alone, as you do, you must be master of yourself to such an extent that you can abstract yourself from all the contingencies of life and do nothing but think and pray.'

'You have touched on a very serious problem in the life of a hermit. After years in a monastery or in a *skete*, detaching oneself from the world, the difficulty lies just in finding oneself

alone, face to face with oneself, alone in control of your body and your mind. Because the mind is a wanderer, you know. Thoughts never stop following each other through your head, buzzing, preventing concentration, while in order to pray you need a great emptiness in your mind. After you've hunted out and punished all your vices, passions, faults—however trivial—you have to hunt out all your thoughts. You have to create an immense silence round you before you can reach the deepest silence in the depths of yourself. Continual prayer, repeating the same words of praise to the Lord; that's what allows one to pray. It's not a question of seeing God, but of being in God, and it's not easy to contain in the narrow limits of your body the limitless spirit which is always trying to escape. That's a hermit's life, more or less.'

'Yes, and I can imagine the sum of will-power, strength and virtue that it represents. I've always found it hard to understand what it is that makes a man able to pray eighteen hours a day. But what surprises me is that you, detached from the world as you are, are still so close to us. When we talk to you you might be in close touch with other men. Is it that by abstraction and prayer, by meditation in fact, one ends by being in communication with the whole universe? Does meditation lead to a sort of "second sight"—no that's not quite the word . . . an intuition of events which are happening in the world, or which are going to happen?'

'The solitary doesn't need to be informed by newspapers or talk. He is enlightened by his own meditations. It's impossible to gauge the power of the mind.'

'And meditation is the way to reach that knowledge of oneself and of the cosmos? I can see that one doesn't learn it in a few days—in a few years—but is there an actual method of meditation?'

'A process, perhaps. The successive stages which, through long years, lead to the destruction of all one's mental habits, are reached as I have already said, by prayer. And do you think you would understand me if I told you how one meditates? It's not your own lot, at least not at present. Go on with your active

and productive young man's life; you've still got a lot to accomplish in your own sphere.'

Georges and Gilbert arrived while this was going on, and questioned me with their eyes. My talk with Father Nicolas had led me far away from our immediate plans. In order to prepare them for his objections to our film, I told them the story of Father Nicolas in New York and this brought forth the end of the adventure.

'Luckily my brother recovered, and I had to leave them. He paid my return passage to Greece and I allowed myself a detour to Paris. I wanted very much to see it again before I died.'

'Then you already knew it?'

'I had lived there for a very long time. But I wanted to see the Louvre floodlit at night and the Victory of Samothrace splendidly displayed, standing at the top of the great stairs. I stayed with friends. I saw the Victory and I've now got the memory of something accomplished. Yes, I saw Paris again.'

The Father allowed his memories to wander: 'By the way, does Felix Potin still exist?'

We exchanged astonished looks.

'I saw, when I went down the rue Royale, that Maxim's is still there—and "Henry". Do you know "chez Henry", an excellent restaurant near the rue de Rivoli?'

'No, we don't know it.'

'I can't remember now what my boot-maker was called—a first-class man. Some of my earliest memories are of Paris. The elephant in the Jardin des Plantes. I was a child, and our governess often used to take us there. Then I left Paris for a long time—I had to follow my parents.'

We dared not question the Father. The sun was high and it was quite time to begin shooting. I wanted him to intercede for us with the other hermits and he gave us a note to his two Russian friends who lived on the other face of Karoulia. He wanted, however, to tell us a bit more of the cliff's history. Even in pagan days it had been the home of a divinity. He said that the sculptor Dinocratus suggested to Alexander that he should

carve the entire mountain in his image—a gigantic effigy whose right hand would hold a town while a river issued forth from his left hand. Each year a golden statue of Apollo was carried with great ceremony to the top of the mountain. It was brought down again each winter, with more ceremonial, and taken to the bottom of the cliff where the harbour now is. To protect it from the earthquakes which occur here from time to time, it was put in a house of iron.

'Oddly enough I once met a Maharajah in India who had himself built an iron house against earthquakes.'

'Do you know India, too?'

'Yes, I once had occasion to go on a tiger hunt, riding an elephant. One of the things I remember best from those days is the railways. The window glass was replaced by leather ventilators, part of which hung in containers of water, so that the air was cooled by the evaporation.'

The talk now turned to our education, the places where we were born and our parents' jobs. Somehow or other—I can't remember how—we got on to the subject of mountains. I had said that mountains were a hard school and that I had learnt a lot from the part of my childhood spent among them—and then we were talking about the Himalayas.

'I had an English friend who loved mountains,' he said. 'After he'd been climbing in the Alps he decided to go off to the Himalayas. I can still remember the talk I had with him—oh, a long time ago, in the Casino at Biarritz, I think it was. He had just got back from his expedition through Tibet and the Himalayas, and as he unfolded his story I had a feeling that he didn't want to tell me how it ended. However, at last he decided to explain his hesitation, and he said that it was only by a miracle that he was there with me. He had been so shaken that he had decided never to go back to the mountains. "At the end of our journey," he said, "we were coming down into India with our yaks. It was at the beginning of the monsoon and it rained all the time. The valleys up by the glaciers were full of mist. It was impossible to see where we were going and I got separated from the caravan. I was soon completely lost. I tried to follow

my friends, I shouted—nothing. Some hours later I stopped exhausted and sat on a rock, surrounded by mist, despairing of ever seeing them again. It was nearly nightfall when I heard bells tinkling. I knew the region well enough to realize that there couldn't be any shepherds up there—the pass was very high. I got up and shouted as loud as I could, and the bells answered. I set off in their direction, and walked for several hours—they seemed to recede as I approached. I suppose it was a mirage, but I was hypnotized and went stubbornly on. A long time later I found myself face to face with an old monk holding a bell. He was waiting for me on the track I had lost, and he said. 'I knew that you were lost. This is your road. Join your friends, because the second time you will not find the way and you will die." It's a curious story, isn't it? Some very strange things happen in the world.'

It was now late in the morning and we had to work. Although Father Nicolas would not let us film him he allowed us to take a few shots of his house and garden and he himself asked that we should take one photograph of him, from a distance and in the shade of a tree, so that he could send it to his brother in the United States.

When we had finished we arranged to meet him once more, the next day.

20. *The Penalties of Film-Making*

WE ROAMED THE GOAT-PATHS of Karoulia for almost two hours, filming the houses and the landscape—the fantastic landscape which lent itself so well to the camera's eye. It was trying work because a squally wind had got up. Real acrobatics were needed in order to keep still while shooting. Since there was nowhere to rest the tripod I had to hold the camera with one hand, while with the other I had to clutch a chain to avoid being blown over by the storm. The heavy rucksack on my back and the nine pounds of batteries on my belt were a menace to my balance. Georges, who carried the film on his back, each reel weighing five pounds, stayed beside me to indicate the position. He supported me when, with my eye to the view-finder, I lost my balance. When a gust was too violent we wedged ourselves one against the other in our attempts to keep our stability.

My forehead ran with sweat which misted my spectacles and smeared the view-finder so that I kept on having to wipe it. In that heat each movement was an effort and we were balanced precariously three hundred feet above the sea. We stored away pictures, but with difficulty: sidling along a ledge, climbing as we filmed down the steps cut lop-sided in the rock, hanging on here and there with our finger-tips. Our work proved much longer than we had foreseen after our exploration the day before. As meticulously as though he were in the studio, Georges jotted in a note-book the distance, the aperture, the light and other indispensable details. Calmly he announced the

list of things to be done before pressing the motor's self-starter.

Our material, luckily, was very good. It was just a matter of saving our batteries so that we would not be taken short and have to return to St Anne to charge them.

Needing a figure in one of our shots, we approached a hut surrounded by prickly pears, part of the group above the harbour. Was it the sound of the waves which prevented the hermit from hearing us? At any rate, he stayed there on his grey wooden balcony, lying in a red canvas deck-chair, basking in the full sun, astonishing in his immobility. We knocked on his door. The man got up to open to us. He was our age, about twenty-eight years old—doubtless one of the youngest on the cliff. He smiled at us and asked us to come in. It was torrid in the hut, but the cistern was there in the middle of the room and the hermit soon offered us water. This was a rite here, and a great comfort to us since we needed about ten pints a day.

This hermit told us he was a new-comer. His entire possessions consisted of a packing case and a box of books, but he emanated a serene joy. He read from time to time, he told us, but not for long, since he concentrated chiefly on prayer. He refused to be filmed.

He made us feel importunate; we were beginning to be influenced by the spirit of this place. We no longer felt a reporter's audacity, we no longer wanted to use our telephoto lens in order to photograph from a distance what we were forbidden to photograph close up. We too had been overcome by the wisdom of Karoulia. We respected the vow of silence made by this young man who had withdrawn here while he still had as many reasons for living as we had, making a choice of which we felt ourselves to be incapable. We said good-bye. He shut his door and we went back to our tribulations.

I felt appallingly tired and had trouble lifting the camera. To hoist it on to my shoulder I had to swing it forward so that, carried by its own weight, it fell on my shoulder with a thump. Every now and then the vertical line made by the cliff against a background of sea and sky would blur, as though I were drunk.

Georges was as whacked as I was but he kept calm and we felt dependent on each other, morally and physically. We made a good team in moments of difficulty. Gilbert, who took no part in the shooting, was waiting in the shade of a bush.

According to Father Nicolas's instructions, his two Russian friends must live in the house with the biggest dome. We had some trouble in reaching it. It was built on a terrace, like all the others, but it was much bigger. The chapel was separate from the dwelling. Our introduction ensured us a welcome. The two men were in their prime, with faces like patriarchs from the Bible, which inspired us to take their portraits at once. Their work of book-binding also interested us, and we unpacked our reflectors in their little work-room. We managed to get the light right and they waited patiently, still and silent, while we got ready to film them. After which, at the start of the motor, they set to work. We finished the sequence with a few shots of the chapel.

Every time we changed a reel of film we needed complete darkness, and this we found in a reasonably murky dug-out under the chapel, the door and window of which we covered with blankets. But at the critical moment, when the film was in the open, we heard the steps of one of the monks approaching, presumably in search of provisions of some sort. We yelled in terror. If he opened the door the whole of the afternoon's penance would have to be undergone again. The Father, who understood no French, couldn't think what was going on. Gilbert flew to the rescue and dragged him off, holding him in conversation.

Evening fell, and we asked whether we might stay with them. They agreed willingly, since the house was large.

The sun dipped below the horizon but the air was no cooler for it. The heat radiated from the rock and the walls. It was almost impossible to sit on the stone parapet because it was so hot; even at midnight it was still warm.

We installed ourselves on the terrace for dinner—our first meal that day. A tin, olives, bread dipped in water and a tomato for dessert. The little terrace seemed to us delicious

and we didn't even feel the hardness of the wooden benches. A rickety oil lamp on the end of the table lit up the chapel's white wall which acted as a reflector in the extreme darkness of the night. A small wooden shutter flapped open and shut in the breeze, and inside we could glimpse a niche in which rested the skull of the last monk to die. Our two monks had gone to say their evening prayers on the balcony of the chapel and we could hear them murmuring in the silence of the night. Suddenly their chanting broke off and one of them came over to ask us 'Have you got salt?'

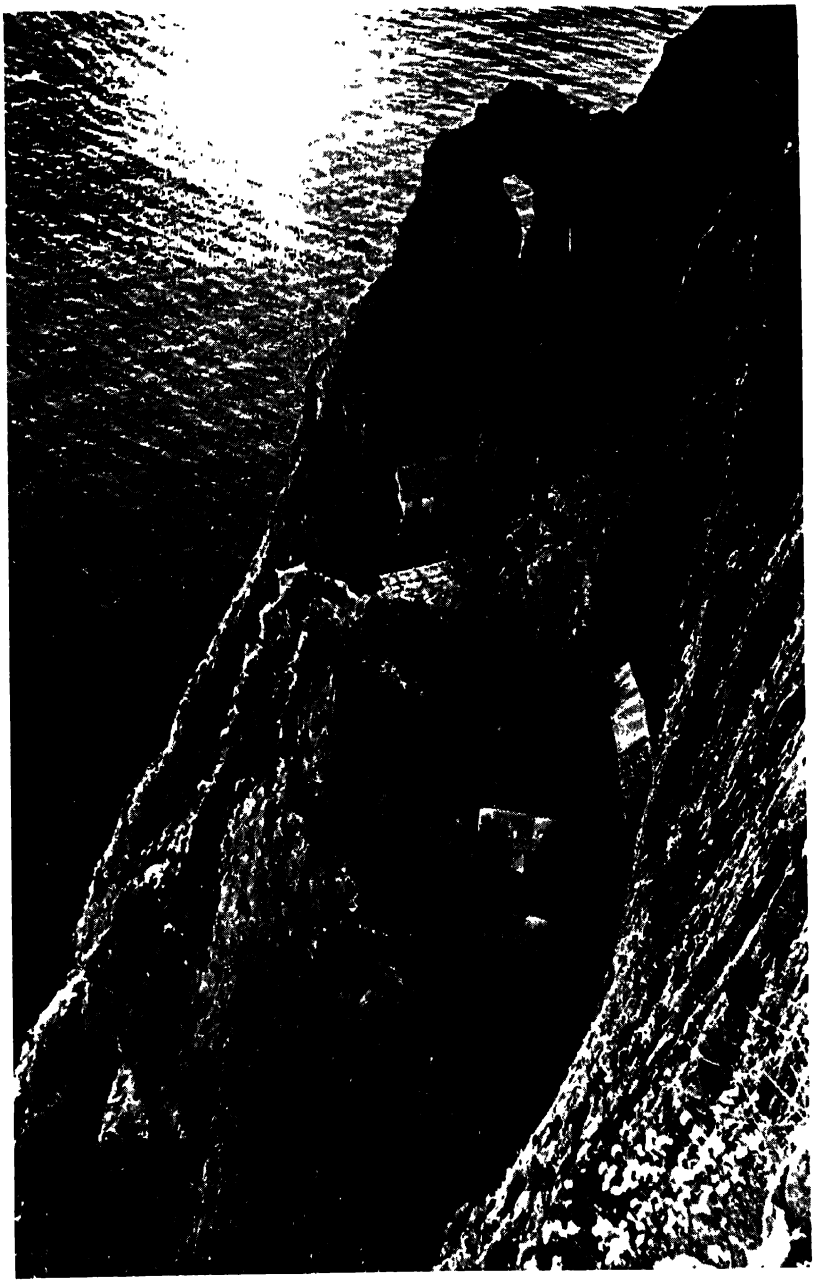
He served us, then went back to join his companion. More prayer, another break, and the other monk came over: 'Would you like some potatoes, or some oil? Don't hesitate to ask for anything you need.'

Prayer again, then a new interruption: 'My friend and I have been thinking that you ought to sleep in the house while we'll sleep under the chapel. It would be better like that. We want to look after you well.'

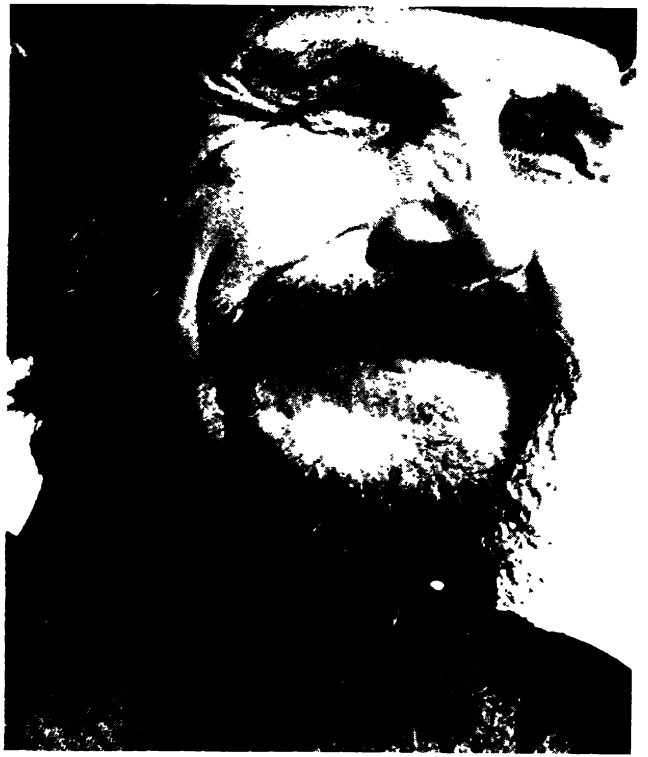
When we refused he went back to his worship.

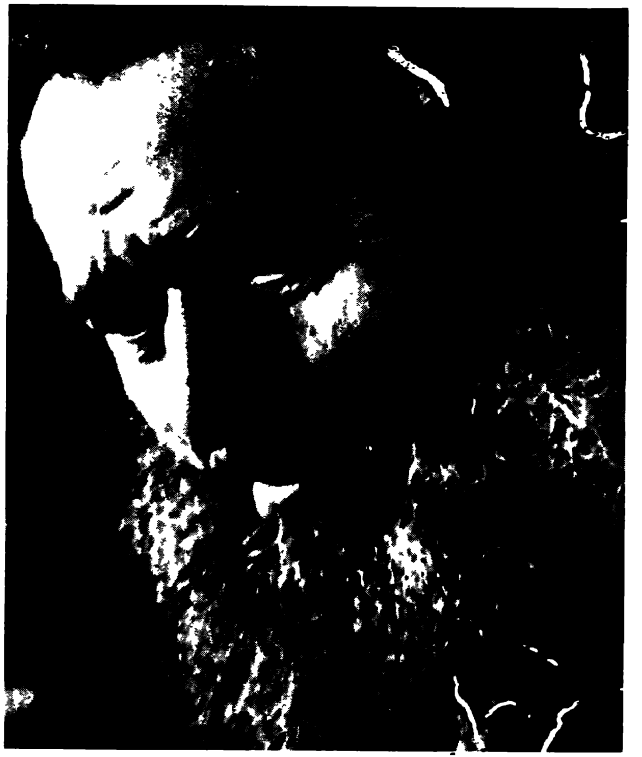
Prayer and dinner over, we still had work to do. We still had to develop a sample piece of each of the exposed reels. It was nearly ten o'clock and we didn't feel in the least like work, but needs must, so we disappeared yet again into the murk of the little dug-out under the chapel, there to prepare our various baths. Having cut a piece of film, I placed it in the developing liquid, prepared in advance. The thermometer showed eighteen degrees—it was lucky it was not hotter, or we would have had to cool it. Watches in hand, we waited the seven minutes necessary. Then, having rinsed the film in a bath of water we replaced it in the developing pan for another bath of fixative. Another wait in the dark. Our brains were already fast asleep. Our eyes were glued to the minute-hand in the light of a pocket torch with a reddened glass. We envied Gilbert, who was already asleep.

There was another worry: that of having to use the precious water in the cistern for washing the film. We cut down on the washing and the film remained all night in the same water.



Looking down on Father Nicolas's house from the House of the Archangels





Serafi

At last I was able to lift the samples out of the fixatives. The pictures were good—even very good. The greys came out very well. But on one of them there seemed to be a scratch running the length of the film. Impossible! Could a grain of dust have got into the camera? It was a catastrophe, meaning that we would have to retake the whole of that reel, which contained the shots of Father Nicolas's house. Disappointed and worn out, we left it at that and collapsed under our blankets. Sleep, just sleep, was what we had to have.

21. *Introducing Demons*

THE NEXT MORNING we examined the film by daylight with a magnifying glass: the scratch was still there. We examined the camera from every angle and could find no trace of dirt; the filter was impeccable; the loaders were as clean as new ones; we couldn't understand it. One thing was clear, however: that we should have to re-take the pictures of Father Nicolas's house and its surroundings.

Back we went again, over the same ground. Ledges, ladders, rock-steps—everything was looking exactly the same and we would be able to take identical pictures. But we had changed. We now felt the landscape to be familiar, we recognized each landmark and each house and could imagine each inhabitant. Only the sea was calmer and we could look deeper into the green transparent water under the ladder-house. We had absorbed even more of the wild character of the place and of the spirit which reigned there. We talked less. We felt no need to exchange impressions and each of us was possessed by the cliff's presence and by its strange destiny.

Sitting in the cave, the skull of the last troglodyte making a fourth to the party, we rested a little and ate a tin of corned beef. The shade was refreshing; outside the heat was thick and heavy. On the horizon the sea and the sky melted together in a vague, pale blue. We were all pondering this place from which, for hundreds of years, an uninterrupted murmur of prayer had

arisen. We ourselves had our feet on the earth and were bound to life by all sorts of contingencies; our bodies, grown skinny from the hard fare, often reminded us that our strength was lessening; our stomachs tweaked us at the thought of good food. Sometimes, too, we talked about women. There was nothing mystic about our lives, particularly in the last few days when the fate of our film obliged us to be as objective as possible and envisage the things we did from the technical point of view as matter to be converted into pictures. Nevertheless we were all soaked in the atmosphere of this place of retreat, gripped, though it's hard to say how, by the sense of a higher presence, something intangible and unknown.

At one time, when I was crossing the tundra in Finnish Lapland by myself, I stopped one evening at a tumbledown cabin and suddenly had a forcible impression of intimate contact with the surrounding air and even with the earth. I was deeply disturbed. A woman to whom I spoke about this later—she was a student of the occult—told me that she had felt the same sense of profound communion producing a sort of anguish while she was travelling on foot somewhere in Tibet.

The same thing happened here, not only to me but to my two companions who had never before experienced such a feeling; we were disturbed without being able to define why. It was as though our beings and the very essence of the things round us had been changed in their nature. We were anxious to discuss our state of mind with Father Nicolas on our next visit, because we felt a great trust in him. He would be able to enlighten us on the extent of our understanding and prevent us getting lost in limitless and bottomless conjecture.

Was it through telepathy that the Father, after a few minutes of random talk, said to us: 'I'm fond of you, because of your youth. Tell me, have you felt anything since you have been here?'

'What do you mean?'

'Have you felt nothing of what this place breathes?'

'It was only an hour ago that we were discussing the strange

sensations this cliff gives us, though we couldn't analyse exactly what we felt.'

Whereupon the Father began a last monologue.

'We hermits gather here, on this cliff, because Karoulia is a privileged place. When I am at prayer in my chapel, I am helped by the souls of all those who have lived here throughout the centuries. Any monk on Mount Athos will tell you the same thing: when we are walking the paths of the peninsula and praying, there are certain places where our concentration and our fervour always come more easily and better. The state of grace always occurs at places where for centuries monks have stopped to rest and meditate: the divine presence is felt more strongly in these places than elsewhere. We discover them in spite of ourselves, intuitively, without knowing about them beforehand. It is only prayer that gives direction to a solitary life. It's a great undertaking, believe me, and can fill a whole lifetime. I've lived here now for nineteen years, and I shall never finish learning all the possibilities of prayer.'

The Father stopped, thoughtful. His wrinkled face suddenly looked relaxed, luminous. We respected his silence and it was on his own accord that he began to speak again.

'Here one expects to find complete solitude, and silence, and one sees all the time that one must never cease protecting the solitude and the silence against attacks from the mind and the imagination which are always raising obstacles and distractions —against a feeling of abandonment, too, because sometimes one finds oneself in a state of terrible perplexity, as though the source of inspiration has dried up. Every hermit has his own torments, weaknesses, desires and anxieties. They must be vanquished one after another, day after day, for years. To help us in this endless struggle we have not only the experience we gained in a monastery but also the rule we have decided to impose on ourselves. The way of the spirit is a ladder, to be climbed rung by rung. And when I say that one must never stop reconquering solitude and silence, I really mean it. Because while we meditate, while we pray as we must, perpetually, even in sleep, demons come to stir up our imaginations—or worries, or

memories. And after we have driven them out with the ardour of our prayers the restless mind creates new demons with new ways of distracting us. Fighting against them is a waste of time and is negative; it is better to go resolutely on with one's meditation. For example, if I'm not very careful when I read a psalm, my mind will wander between the first and last line. It is necessary to concentrate on every sentence without one's attention wandering for a single moment. When you are concentrating on intoning a psalm, you can be distracted by the movement of a hair. Demons are offering you thoughts all the time: a little worry, a feeling of heat or weariness, a pebble under your foot, anything, and you go astray. You have to go back to the beginning. You've got to resist and reject everything—or rather, you've got to prevent the beginnings of any thoughts, because they are nothing but temptations.'

We dared not move, so impressed were we by Father Nicolas's words. He was illuminating the mysticism of Mount Athos and revealing to us great spiritual riches. He went on:

'There's one frontier which is very difficult to cross: getting rid of one's whole past life and rejecting memory, which is, after all, the basis of all human thought, but which is a form of temptation to the solitary. Nothing must exist for us any more and one only achieves this blotting out of memory after terrible efforts. You may think, one day, that you have definitely excluded every occasion for remembering—and it will be just then, in a dream, perhaps, that your imagination will bring up a picture from the past. You'll dream one night that a relation is ill, that you are going to help them—or you may dream that they are dead. You have got to resist everything, in spite of anything, and suppress the least temptation. It is only by destroying all and every link that you win the struggle, that you emerge victorious from the lonely battle with yourself. We only have one weapon with which to defend ourselves against ourselves and against the mind's demons, and that's continual prayer. And the thought of death, too. It's a good thing to tell yourself each morning that this is your last day. The struggle

against the demons which we carry on at every moment prepares us little by little for our journey into the beyond, which is where complete detachment must end. You make progress, you are driven back, you cross line after line with appalling difficulty, right up to the day of your death when at last the spirit is free of everything and can contemplate God.'

There, in its fullness, was Father Nicolas's message. He had allowed us to glimpse a great phenomenon: mystical devotion. He was carried on the same current which had vitalized the Christian Church throughout the ages, which in India has created sects outside the established dogmas and which, in Greece, was the religion of the initiates of antiquity. By ourselves we would never have been able to see a truth inaccessible to reason—the evidence of God as revealed by Father Nicolas.

To bring the conversation to an end, he reverted to a lighter tone.

'Now, my friends, I must say good-bye to you. I must make up for lost time, and you have got your work to do. I hope you make a fine film. I would like to say just one thing to you before you go. You will return to the world and its customs; I don't know how you live in it, but I would like to say that you have to fight against demons too, in your city, just as I have to in my solitude. I don't know what your faith is, but the Devil takes on every kind of shape and attacks every kind of religion and every human life. You don't think so, of course—you're still children and you know that the Devil doesn't exist. He's just a symbol expressing anything which deflects you from the Good. Well, when you are back in your city, think occasionally of your "rucksack" for eternity. Even if it won't be very big when you leave this life, always make an effort. Now, I'm an old man, so I must hurry. Au revoir—or perhaps good-bye. Before you leave, go and visit Father Gabriel who lives up there. He's an excellent chap—and when you get there, this evening, call me from his house. I'd like to say good-bye. Don't forget, now!'

As we made our way along the path we turned for a last look

at Father Nicolas's house and chapel. He waved to us from his little terrace, one foot on the wall, his eyes smiling, his face happy. Then he went back to his life of struggle and of immense peace.

22. *The House of the Archangel*

OUR WORK HAD NOT taken long. We would have liked to prolong our stay but material considerations demanded our return that evening to the painters of St Anne as soon as we had called on Father Gabriel. We had no food left and there was no question of asking the hermits for any.

From Father Nicolas's terrace the Archangel's house had looked as though it were within hand's reach, a mere two hundred yards or so as the crow flies. But it wasn't possible to climb the smooth, vertical wall (testing even for experienced mountaineers) which the house crowned. We had to go right down to the sea again, by the cave and the harbour, and climb the less steep slopes where the other houses were.

It was five o'clock when we reached the Archangel's house, which merited its name. It clung to the rock face and one couldn't imagine the hermit who had conceived the idea of transporting stone by stone the material to build a terrace on a ledge a few yards long and little more than six feet wide. We had to ring before going in—Father Nicolas had warned us that Father Gabriel insisted on this. A small wooden door opened into a stone porch. Without coming out of his house, some five yards away, Father Gabriel opened the door by an ingenious system of strings attached to the latch.

As though working by a photo-electric cell, the door creaked and opened on to narrow and steep stone steps edged on the drop side with a little wall a few inches high. The house was

built against the cliff, which soared straight up for another fifty feet. It was crescent shaped and with its corrugated iron roof and walls made of flattened oil-drums it looked like a shanty-town hut.

On the right was the chapel; on the left, three tiny cells opening directly on to space and the sea. Then there was a kind of covered gallery which linked the first hutment to another. A plank floor had been thrown across the gap between the two ledges on which the houses stood, and it creaked in a sinister way as we crossed it. The second house, smaller and lower than the first, was Father Gabriel's living-room. Pressed against the cliff, it left a path between itself and space on which two people could have passed each other with difficulty.

This was the universe of Father Gabriel, who had been here who knows how long. He was a man of about fifty, not very tall, with black beard and hair. His features were well-cut and severe, his eyes sharp, and the hardness of his face bespoke energy. He talked fast, in a loud voice, leading us through his domain with brisk steps and always accompanying his words with brusque gestures.

'Here's the chapel. Those are the cells. I'm alone now, my companion died. At one time four monks lived here.'

When we reached the terrace in front of the second house he went and fetched some almonds and a hammer, which he laid on the wall.

'Eat, they are good. I can only offer you those but I do it willingly.'

Then he went away for a few minutes, still walking briskly. If one of the almonds jumped away on being hit with the hammer, it fell straight down to the bottom of the cliff without once rebounding from rock. There was no parapet at the end of the terrace. Father Gabriel had made a wood-pile in a crack in the rock.

I don't think I have ever seen a more impressive view than we had from that narrow ledge, on which one couldn't move without prudent precautions. The cliff plunged down beneath us for about three hundred feet without any projection. It was

so smooth that even the eye could find nothing to cling to. As though from an aeroplane, we overlooked Father Nicolas's house with its two little shrubs, Father Serafin's house lower down, then the walled house of the prisoner-hermit. Right at the very bottom, on the last spur of rock, was the pulley-house. To our left the cliff unrolled its immense slope, with the houses near the harbour at the bottom.

Six o'clock. The sun went slowly down. Nothing above us, nothing below. We might have been sailing through nowhere in a little boat. A gentle breeze came up the side of the cliff and caressed our faces.

We decided to call Father Nicolas. Cupping our hands to our mouths we shouted in the direction of his house: 'Father Nicolas!' Nothing, no answer. 'Father Nicolas!' Still no sign of him in his garden, although he was certainly at home. All together we yelled again: 'Faaather Niiicolaaaas!'—and he came out on to his terrace. He looked tiny, seen from above.

'Jacques!' he called, in a small voice. He was not able to shout very loud but the silence was so great that we could hear him.

'Good-bye Georges, good-bye Gilbert. *Bon voyage.*'

'Look after yourself.'

'You too.'

Then, since the distance was too great for conversation, we waved a last au revoir.

Father Gabriel was a hard man. It would be well to keep on the right side of him. He turned on you for a trifle, as though you had committed a sin. An odd man, with a fiery temperament. He spoke dryly, as though we bored him. He may have been pleased with our visit but he didn't show it and it was difficult to establish contact with him.

When we referred to the situation of his house, so high up, and said that it must be the perfect place for meditation, he answered that that was obvious since he was near heaven and, at night, the stars. Looking towards the promontory of Longos, his face hardened and he added: 'One has to hate the world to come here—the world in which people live. It is good to be far from your civilization and the disorder of cities.'

He clearly associated us with everything he had rejected and we felt irrevocably judged.

Making great use of gestures, he explained to us how hard life was in the house of the Archangel. For one thing one had, after all, to pay a certain amount of attention to the cliff.

Like all men who seek continually to master and surpass themselves, he was conscious of the value and direction of his efforts. He described them, however, with such conviction and so much interior ecstasy that he seemed all the time to be saying: 'Just try, and you will see how good it is.'

In the chapel, in an attempt to make us understand his method of prayer, he stood before the lectern and mimed it, murmuring something incoherent like a child praying. He explained that one must always repeat the same phrase and speak it aloud, and how, when one is kneeling, one becomes short of breath and the intoning becomes exhausting.

One of the cells had been converted into a bakehouse, and there the Father continued his eloquent mime.

'If you are overtaken by boredom or laziness, you must turn to manual labour. At midday, for example, when you want to sleep—that's the time to work.'

He took up a handful of flour: 'No money, no flour, and then you must tighten your belt,' he said, pulling on the cord round his waist. 'It's good to go without.'

Without understanding what he was explaining, we watched him fall on his knees in the middle of his room, rise, make the sign of the Cross, kneel again, and so on and so on. . . . He was demonstrating that the best time for prayer was at night, close to the stars. He told us that he would make a hundred, five hundred or a thousand genuflexions without stopping, and as he talked he mimed the movements of an exhausted man, falling asleep. With these physical exercises he fought against lapses that might lead him to grow soft.

It was a strange scene and really made us feel the nocturnal life of this hut when alone, face to the sky, the Father forced himself to make his thousand genuflexions in spite of his exhaustion and the temptation of sleep. He had a system to tell

him where he had got to, in case he lost count. A wire was strung at a height which compelled him to reach up, and on it were strung used cotton reels. After each genuflexion he pushed a reel along to the other end of the wire. He was insistent about the merits of this method which prevented him cheating or making a sketchy genuflexion. Sometimes he went out to pray on the little path by the door. He found it the best place for prayer. Then he would count with white stones which showed up in the darkness.

As he talked he would sometimes be carried away by his enthusiasm and would forget that we couldn't understand when he spoke too fast. Then he would slow down, rather vexed and looking as though he wondered what we were doing in his house.

He offered us some more almonds, thus indicating that he had no more time to waste on us. We went away, leaving him to his prayer and his self-mortification.

Night was falling fast. We dragged ourselves towards St Anne, deeply perplexed by the life led by these men. At the top of the cliff we sat down on a sun-warmed slab in order to enjoy this strange and disturbing place for the last time. The sky was full of millions of stars. The sea was an immense black chasm at our feet. We were no longer in a hurry and each of us spoke slowly, as though to himself.

One of the things which surprised us was the freedom with which these monks decided on their own programmes; they pursued the same ends, lived against the same landscape, yet each chose his own way to attain his knowledge of—God or the Truth, whichever you will. Each was free to adopt the discipline best suited to his temperament. We were also astonished to see how, in their solitude and asceticism, they preserved the vitality of men of action although their field of action was reduced to a few square yards. Unlike us, they could use their minds without the stimulus of city life. We became rusty by the end of a long country holiday and needed the pressure of society to wake us up; they found in themselves the strength to live, believe and

think. All alone as they were, they were still eminently 'thinking men', giving the impression of being further immersed than we were in the life of the heart and spirit. It was certainly a victory of the spirit over human nature. In spite of their austere daily diet, to which were added a hundred and forty-five days of complete fast, they also kept their physical strength, which indicated a high degree of equilibrium. They must, we thought, have a very accurate knowledge of the limits of their physical resistance. The wisdom of Mount Athos gives men cool blood and clear minds.

The essential problem of such a life, it seemed to us, was for each man to discover the methods best suited to his own spiritual evolution, and then to force himself, of his own accord, to follow them. 'Did you notice,' interrupted Georges, 'that Father Nicolas refused the tea but accepted the matches which, although they were necessary to him, would not in any way increase his comfort.' It was a small concrete example of self-knowledge and the art of self-mastery.

Material privation was not, we felt, the hardest part of the ascetic's life: more difficult was the constant struggle against his own mind, always ready to offer temptation. Some must surely have been driven mad by this incessant conflict. That was why, as Father Nicolas had explained, solitude should be preceded by a time in a monastery or in one of the *sketes*. He had used the phrase 'spiritual ladder': the fresco at the Great Lavra, intended for the use of ordinary monks, was a rather simplified representation of a perilous and complex spiritual adventure. Had not Father Gregory spoken of conquering ambition and pride, the two chief motives in social life? That gave an idea of the sacrifice necessary in order to draw nearer to God through prayer.

Our discussion became lively on the question whether each man necessarily passes through the same ordeals at a given moment in his religious life, and must surmount them in order to reach the next and higher stage. It was not a simple problem. It has taken a great many thinkers and saints to chart the ways of contemplation. Some among them have studied and, some-

times, codified the various stages by which a man with no knowledge of the supernatural can attain total knowledge of the universal existence. Certainly each man must encounter his own difficulties. We had seen how the hermits of Karoulia each stressed different aspects of their effort. The stormy Father Gabriel curbed and advanced himself by physical constraint, while for Father Nicolas it was the mind which needed to be tamed. The young novice armed with a deck-chair and books was doubtless an intellectual and would end by burning both his chair and his library.

Can one say that there is a single technique of spiritual evolution, or that similarities exist between the different methods? It seemed to me that Father Gabriel's genuflexions repeated a thousand times in order to inspire a feeling of humility and love, were not unlike the exercises advocated by yogis for those seeking to concentrate their spirits; a renunciation of the personality, the first step towards communion with the Divine.

Did they all practise the same *sum* of spiritual exercises: the first Christian coenobites, the yogis, St Thomas Aquinas, and the hermits of Mount Athos?

'If the obstacles are the same for everyone, why don't they occur in a constant order?' questioned Gilbert.

'I think they are the same,' said Georges.

'I'm sure that it's not a matter of individual temperament—the spiritual life is bigger than that. It's up to each man to submit as well as he can to the tests it imposes.'

How long, we wondered, was the evolution needed to bring one face to face with God? Father Nicolas had spoken of many years of obedience in order to subdue the individuality; and after that, no doubt there were twenty or thirty capes to round —perhaps many more. There must surely be some dark moments when a man is tired of fighting and longs to give up the endless struggle.

Father Paul of St Anne had admitted in front of us that many years of mortification are not always enough to overcome anger and blasphemy. After what I had seen of Mount Athos I had

gained an idea of how one might revolt against the perpetual constraint of prayer. And I imagine that the higher one has mounted on the ascending curve of the spiritual life, the more one is threatened by temptations. The nearer one is to God, the greater the fall. St Theresa of Avila suffered terribly. But the level they had reached must also have given the great mystics strength to go on climbing.

Whatever means the monks of Mount Athos employed, what was striking about them was their inner joy—the impression they gave of complete repose of soul and body won through thousands of hours of prayer and—something we found hard to understand—of intoning; of prayer continued waking or sleeping to the rhythm of exhausting breathing and measured by the monotonous repetition of a single phrase.

For the last time that evening—perhaps for the last time in our lives—we inhaled the breath of prayer which rose up from the cliff of Karoulia.

Continuing our walk back, followed by a warm breeze, we could not stop thinking of those hermits, each shut in his cell; men who had succeeded in leaving the world for good and were living out their lives in the most difficult way that had been offered them.

PART FOUR

23. *The Weather Changes*

THE CHANGE FROM THE Archangel's house to the hermitage of St Anne meant much more to us than the climb down from the broken rocks of the plateau to the coast; it meant going from conditions in which the love of God had been pushed to the extent of complete self-forgetfulness to an activity which confined us, whether we would or no, to our personal preoccupations. We had to supervise the generator, which was running only adequately, while it charged the batteries; pack the films of the *sketes* and of Karoulia; make notes for the shooting of the Great Lavra; bargain with the owner of a boat over our passage next day; and spread our sleeping bags on the beach for the night. We were still haunted by the austerities and ecstasies of the hermits, even as we sat on the pebbly beach with a group of Greek fishermen, eating their freshly caught fish whose delicious nutty taste startled our palates after their enforced fast.

We had left the realm of eternal silence where the soul and heart could stay remote from the horrors that threaten the peoples of the earth. The last world war did not spare Greece and here, as elsewhere, there had been a Resistance, reprisals and private revenge. Most of the people had horrible memories which would be with them for ever, as was proved by something which happened that evening. While we were going for a stroll along a dark pathway overhung by branches, chatting as we went, we heard a man's footsteps. Suddenly they stopped. A

shadow recoiled before us. We went on walking, in silence now, and came up with the man whom I thought I recognized as the master of a boat. I said 'Good evening'. He gave a cry and suddenly appeared in the light of a pocket torch which Georges had switched on, trembling and pale with fear. He ran away without a word. Later we met him, sitting on the terrace of the café by the port, and there, having pulled himself together, he told us how his nerve had been shattered by his experiences in the civil war. To hear him one might have thought that we were still living in the age of the great pirates.

These stories cast a shadow over the sparkling landscape; a shadow now deepened for us, by the uncertainties of autumn. Our skipper hustled us on the journey back to the Great Lavra, fearing the storms which were likely to make the passage difficult. We too began to hurry, in order to shoot the last sequences while the light was still good.

At the monastery the monks seemed to pay no attention to our preparations, not even when I followed one of them through the alleys with my eye to the view-finder. One of them lifted his head with a smile of satisfaction when he thought he was within the camera's field of vision. To be on the safe side we employed various tricks to hide the camera. Georges would stand opposite me while I worked, or I would ask the monks to step aside, as though I wanted to take a shot without figures.

Our story needed a scene expressing the calm and the slow rhythm of time measured by the daily services, so we posted ourselves on the look-out in the court when Father Isidore began his ceremonial progress in order to summon the monks with his three *semantrons*. As soon as the call was sounded a monk came out of his little house. It was an excellent shot. A hand fell on my shoulder.

'Are you filming the Father?'

'Oh no! Only the walls and the frescoes.'

'But why? We like to be filmed.'

We were disarmed. Georges gave me a startled glance and the Secretary invited us very kindly to take coffee in the monastery's council chamber.

We were completely at a loss: was filming forbidden, or wasn't it? We went to see Father Denis who had heard nothing of any order coming from the Holy Community and offered to accompany us to the council chamber where we would ask for confirmation from the Abbot. The *Epitropi*, sitting round their Abbot, smiled at the story of our brush with the monks of Dionysiou. As far as they were concerned they could see no reason why we should not continue with our work.

Two days of complete calm went by. The monks posed as we wished. The *semantron* player, whom we filmed from every angle, seemed highly flattered at playing the star part. From time to time the Secretary came to see us and asked us, in a friendly way, not to film 'the old ruins'—which was his name for the ancient monks who pottered from bench to bench, leaning on their sticks, and who might give a pitiful impression of the community.

Then Georges woke us up one morning to announce that the sky was grey with cloud. Huddled in our sleeping bags, we cursed the bad weather because now, late in September, it might be setting in for good. Would we have time to finish the film?

Round midday we were able to take a few more shots, in snatches, after which we decided to get to Iviron as fast as possible. The Secretary dissuaded us from waiting for a boat because the sea was very rough and, besides, all the wood destined for Greece had been dispatched so that boats were becoming rare.

That night we slept as usual in a barn down by the harbour, with our gear beside us, all ready to embark. The delay allowed us to repair the generator which had been through decidedly too much. The next morning the Secretary telephoned Iviron and confirmed that none of the fishermen would dream of coming to the Great Lavra in such stormy weather. There was nothing for it but to leave on foot and to find mules to carry our baggage over the mountainous paths.

There was a lad who carried things back and forth between the port and the monastery on mules, and we asked him to hire

us one or two of his animals which were going up without loads so that we could take our gear up to the monastery. We hoped, once we got there, to work on the monks so that they would lend us a mule or two with which to reach the next monastery. The boy, however, refused. When we added the promise of a tip to our pleas, he made signs that he wanted five thousand drachmas—an absurd sum for little more than three hundred yards. He would rather earn nothing than lower his price, so letting him go with his unloaded beasts, we resumed our discussions with the monks.

The Great Lavra had once owned a considerable herd of mules, but since the war, when the Germans had requisitioned them, they had only a few. However, the tradition of hospitality prescribes that travellers must be lent a mount to take them on to the next monastery—though only to the next monastery, and no further. We thus received two mules with which to go to Karakala, an inland monastery between the Great Lavra and Iviron.

The layman who was to go with us seemed much distressed by the lopsided appearance of our loads. He appeared to be about to take the whole thing off, then thought better of it and went away. A few minutes later he reappeared with two large rocks which he arranged on the pack-saddles to right the balance. The sky was overcast, the sea was rough, and all along the path we could hear the waves crashing on the rocks. It was a dreary walk.

We reached Karakala at about six in the evening and tried without success to get two more mules to take us straight on to Iviron, a good hour's walk. The man from the Great Lavra didn't want to come any further. 'It's not usual,' he said.

A wintry evening in a big, cold room. For the first time there was rain beating against the windows. I went cold at the thought that the weather had finally changed and that the film wasn't finished. At four o'clock in the morning we were woken by the call of the *semantron*.

'He's not much good.'

'Not a patch on Father Isidore.'

'A little provincial player.'

And we went back to sleep.

At dawn the monks lent us two mules which we loaded as best we could and with which we hurried on to Iviron as fast as possible. The weather had improved for the moment and the alarms of the last twenty-four hours urged us to make the best of it.

At Iviron I filmed while Georges tried in vain to get more mules for the rest of the journey. We were in luck, however, because the regular boat profited from the calm in order to call in at Iviron, and we reached Vatopedi that evening.

The monks gave us just as cold a welcome as they had done the first time. We felt that they disliked our renewed presence, particularly as we were everywhere all the time—up the towers, in the churches, in the courts and in the corridors. The next afternoon, at about three o'clock, while we were filming the frescoes on the exterior wall of the church, a monk approached us—the same monk who had talked to us about life in the monasteries on our first visit. He was sent to bring us, with our camera, into the big reception room where we were faced by a solemn little group composed of the Secretary, a policeman and two civilians on pilgrimage.

Our interpreter-monk, who still had something of the dockyard about him, stayed with us and translated.

'The policeman wants you to know that you must take the boat tomorrow. That's an order.'

'For what reason?'

'Your *diamonitirions* only authorize you to stay on the peninsula until September 22nd. You should have gone four days ago.'

'We haven't finished our work.'

The tone became sharper. 'The policeman orders you to leave.'

'We shall stay here until we have finished.'

'The order comes from Karyes. You must go.'

'Does it come from the Holy Community or from the Police?'

'From both.'

'We are not so sure.'

The conversation was becoming venomous, we preferred to end it.

'May we telephone Karyes? We know the doctor there and we would like to speak to him.'

The policeman looked very bored. It was obvious that he was carrying out instructions and would sooner have been somewhere else. They took us to the telephone and the policeman put through the call, rather stiffly. We asked our interpreter to tell him that we understood his situation, but that we must finish our film. We only needed a few more days: three at the most at Vatopedi and four at Chilandari.

The doctor was away. It was disaster. As for the Chief of Police he repeated that the Holy Community ordered us to leave the next day, without fail.

Could we telephone Salonika, we pressed. Karyes answered that it was impossible. Later, of course, we learnt that it was perfectly possible to call Salonika but at that moment, for whatever reason, everything was against us and no one came to our aid.

We ended by accepting the verdict but without considering ourselves beaten. We would go on filming the monastery for the rest of the afternoon. Unhappily our batteries expired. We ran to the beach to start up the generator. It ran for half an hour and then stopped. It seemed to us that the few laymen who were wandering about down there were delighted to see us in trouble. We took the motor to pieces. A part was broken and we had nothing with which to repair it. This was appalling luck.

We wondered whether to take the morning boat, as we were bidden, and go as far as the harbour of Chilandari. There Georges and I could get off with the camera and Gilbert could go on to Erissos with the heavy stuff. We could argue with the monks at Chilandari if they, too, had received the order. The boat only called every two days, so we would anyway have time to take the indispensable sequences. It was a risky solution,

however: The reserve batteries were hardly charged and we might not have the electricity to turn the camera.

After several hours of discussion we decided that we would all take the boat to Erissos and from there telephone the French Consul at Salonika so that he could persuade the Metropolitan or the police—the rulers of this land—to allow us a few more days on the peninsula. We also thought that we might be able to buy a generator, since we had noticed that the village radios ran on batteries.

Next morning, at dawn, all our gear was stacked on the quay. A policeman and a monk had come to make sure of our departure.

When the wide beach at Erissos came in sight we almost felt that we were emerging from a prison. People were shouting on the beach—the first shouts we had heard in months. Children and women were talking, but the sound of their voices didn't make us jump like the voice of the child who had been reading to the painters. There was a little open-air kiosk on the beach with a bamboo roof and a few tables standing in the sand. It brought back in a sudden wave all the charms of a life we had forgotten. I asked the proprietor if I might wind up an ancient gramophone with a horn so that we could hear a little reedy music. We listened blissfully, lying back in our chairs.

It was nearly five o'clock before an idling muleteer agreed to take our baggage as far as the inn—over 500 pounds of it, and his animal was tiny. As the gear accumulated on his back his legs spread wider and wider apart and his muscles quivered. It was alarming to watch. And on top of all that the man threw a bag belonging to a friend who was coming home to the village. The mule did not collapse under the terrible load, but he could only stagger.

The inn was an ordinary little house where we slept in the rooms usually used by the family. They moved into a tent outside. Georges and I hurried off to telephone the consul. We could feel evening coming, the air was fresh. The post office was distinguished from the other houses only by a notice in French

(as everywhere in Greece): POSTE—TELEGRAPHE—TÉLEPHONE. It was like anything rather than a post office. A family was living in the cellar. A chicken came in from the garden and pecked round our feet.

The telephone apparatus was distinctly curious: a sheaf of many-coloured wires, rather like firework fuses, emerging from a hole in the wall through which you could see the sky. Only some of these wires seemed to be used, plugged haphazard into a broad plank which was used as a switchboard. The earpiece was of wood and the mouthpiece of copper, whitened by contact with the operator's sweat.

The postmaster picked up the receiver and pressed a button.

'Hullo Maria . . .' (The telephonist in the next village) '. . . I want Salonika please.' Maria passed him on to the next village, and so on, from stage to stage, for there is only one line between Erissos and Salonika.

'Hullo, good evening. How are you? Can you get me Salonika. . . .'

At last he got there, but the nearer he got the louder grew his voice, until when he was actually in touch with Salonika he was literally yelling.

I was becoming uneasy at the thought of having to explain our complicated troubles to the Consul in such conditions.

Alas! the consulate was shut. I managed by the skin of my teeth to prevent the operator from ringing off, and asked for whoever was at his home. A woman answered and said that the Consul would be in his office at ten o'clock the next morning. In a quarter of an hour the whole of Erissos knew that we were trying to telephone our Consul.

The next morning we began again, the telephone functioning no better. At last, after twenty minutes, the triumphant postmaster handed me the receiver. I could hear a distant and distorted voice. After making sure that it really was the Consul I shouted our story as loud as I could, syllable by syllable, interspersing it with civilities. His response was magnificent. He would take action, and we would hear the result from the police at Erissos. Exhausted, I hung up.

We spent the day in the inn, sorting our film and our notes. We recapitulated what we had achieved and listed our colour photographs. At four o'clock we went round to the police station, where they knew nothing and refused to telephone Salonika.

Georges discovered the village generator at the garage—which, incidentally, had no car. We charged all our batteries and also took the chance of eating enormously. There was a photographer in the village square and we went and had our pictures taken, delighted to be at the receiving end for once. A dozen inquisitive children came to watch him erecting his rudimentary apparatus which had a hole covered with a copper disc instead of a shutter. 'Attention!' he called in French. 'Attention!'—and he took away the copper disc and began to count—up to eighteen! I had fully expected to have to pose for up to five seconds, but eighteen! We got very short of breath. He developed the pictures on the spot, and the photographs were enough to terrify our families. As soon as they received them our parents began to wonder whether they would ever again see us alive.

At seven o'clock in the evening the police station repeated that they had still received no news of our renewed permits.

Our second day in Erissos went by in the same suspense, but at about five o'clock our landlady told us that the chief of police had come to see us in person. Surely this fat man in a brand-new suit was going to tell us that we could go back to Mount Athos—but how we wanted to be certain! One of the village girls who could speak French translated for us:

'The chief of police says that you can stay on Mount Athos for one day, or one month, or one year, as you wish.'

24. *The End of the Adventure*

WE WERE READY ON the beach an hour early for fear of missing the boat for Chilandari which left at seven in the morning. It was a grey day. As soon as we were out of the bay the swell increased and the boat, which was only a small caïque with no keel, began to roll. We were very lightly loaded and the spray swept over the deck while the caïque pitched so violently that I had to lash the camera-case to the mast to prevent it going overboard. Shortly before we arrived at Chilandari I became violently sea-sick.

We set off at once in the rain on the walk to the monastery, a few miles away. The clouds were low on the mountains.

The Secretary greeted us warmly and we noticed that he did not bother about our *diamonitirions*. When, towards the end of the afternoon, it cleared up a little and we were able to begin on one of the scenes we had planned, no one objected to our work. Evening came, without anyone mentioning a ban on filming and when we ourselves brought the subject up discreetly the Secretary pretended to know nothing about it. Where, then, had the false rumour started which had caused us so much trouble? It was better not to pursue the matter and to take advantage of the sun as soon as it appeared.

Early next day we were out studying the sky which was still stubbornly grey. At about ten o'clock a fine rain began to fall and we felt cold in our summery clothes. We lay in our sleeping bags and smoked our pipes.

A break in the clouds—clear the decks for action! Clutching our gear we tore up the steps in order to take a sequence of the church. In the time we took to sort ourselves out a cloud had covered the sun. Gilbert climbed the tower to keep a look-out and herald any hole in the clouds; Georges relayed the information from the court. Look out . . . any minute now! The camera was ready and I was stretched out in an uncomfortable position with my neck twisted round to look at the ceiling of the church, which was what I was filming. The sun came out and lit up the church—it was an excellent shot. There was just time to take one more and the sun disappeared.

We still had to shoot one more sequence, from the hill which enfolded the monastery, showing the building as a whole. We tore through the woods. The path petered out in the valley and we scaled the hill through the undergrowth and among the rocks of a dry stream-bed. The camera was passed from one to another like a rugby ball. The sun reappeared. We must hurry, there was still another hundred yards to go. We could already glimpse the monastery through the trees. We must find an open place, we must put up the camera—quickly done with the three of us—the exposure, the distance . . . and I filmed a fine long sequence. Hardly had I finished when the sun disappeared, not behind a cloud but behind the hill, the shadow of which now covered the monastery.

The film was finished.

Our last evening on Mount Athos was uneventful. We went to bed early, meaning to catch the boat which left Iviron at break of day for Erissos. During the night, however, a storm got up on the north coast and the boat failed to arrive. The Secretary advised us to leave on foot in order not to be stuck at Chilandari for perhaps a month. It would be, he added, a nine-hours walk. It was pretty long, but by now we were anxious to get home.

The Secretary saw us on our road and wished us a good journey. He had prepared a little picnic for each of us—olives, small rolls and some cheese. It was Mount Athos's last gesture of hospitality.

After a few hours we left the wooded area. The trees thinned out, and we walked on ancient paving stones buried in sand, beside a strange, pale green sea which looked surprising in a Greek landscape. The country became desert-like, the sky was veiled by a thin film of cloud and our dark glasses were too dark for the diffused light although without them it hurt our eyes.

I was carrying the camera-case on my back, a weight of about eighty pounds. Gilbert and Georges carried similar loads, though Georges's was made more awkward by the tripod of the camera. We walked in single file, picking our way through the stones on the path.

At the top of a hill we met two men with a loaded mule. One of them spoke French—he had learnt it in Cairo, he told us. He was holding a big paint-brush in his hand and had a bag over his shoulder. They had both come to Mount Athos to find work among the monks.

'Where are you from?'

'Salonika.'

'You've walked?'

'Yes. It took two months because we had to earn our bread as we went.'

Bent under our loads, we were finding the road very long. The landscape was dreary and unattractive; nothing but burnt-out trees as a lugubrious adornment. If we were to believe the map it would take us more than two hours to reach the natural frontier of Athos and a range of hills cutting across the route.

The ground became hard again, covered with bushes and meagre birch trees. When we reached the first of a series of plateaux we discovered an enormous black rain-cloud coming down from the mountains of Macedonia in the north, like a squall at sea. There was not a tree nor a house in sight. The cloud reached our slope, enveloped it, and was upon us. Unexpectedly, the rain was warm. We stopped instinctively, but what was the good? It was better to go on walking without bothering. We hid our shirts in our rucksacks and plunged into the torrential rain. A wind got up like a tornado. The water

streamed down our chests, ran down our legs and filled our shoes. The clay path was turned into a stream. It was chaotic.

Every now and then there would be the sound of a dull oath as one or other of us stumbled into a deep puddle and fell down. We were at the end of our resources and the few words we exchanged betrayed our exhaustion. We were hungry, we needed rest.

We thought of Karoulia and the hole in the roof of Father Serafin's hut. It was impossible to forget those men, and now we were being given an idea of their life during the winter.

Once the mountain was crossed we were on a zig-zag path where we slithered helplessly in the mud. We suddenly found ourselves on the plain at the foot of the hills. Little by little the rain died away. . . .

Our walk was like a flight, an exodus.

We had lost the track and had to make our way like sharp-shooters through the neatly-aligned olive trees and the tilled fields. At last we came to a stone path which led to a cabin. We collapsed on the ground. Our rucksacks and ourselves were soaked through and through with rain. The Air-France label on the camera-case—PARIS–ATHENS—had come unstuck, half torn off and limp. That was how we felt: our adventure was peeling away from the present. It was over.

The storm had passed on and the sun came out with renewed vigour, drawing steam out of the dug earth. Looking back at the slope we had just come down we could see the whole extent of the great mountain barrier standing there like a wall. Its black mass blended with the storm-cloud, while down in the plain the silvery green of the olive trees glittered with sunlight and freshness.

There behind us was the frontier of Mount Athos and we knew now to what an extent it isolated from the rest of the world the men who had retired there, unknown and forgotten; the men who, with their burden of hopes and private agonies were advancing along the road to eternity.